

Lights and Shadows

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MONUMENTS OF THE PAST, BUT IN THE SOUTH THEY ARE
 PUFFS WHEN IT COMES TO PURE EDUCATION. MY EDUCATION CAME ON A DARK OCTOBER AFTERNOON
 IN MOBILE, ALABAMA, IN THE HIGHLY-TRAVELED ENTRANCE TO A WAL-MART SUPERCENTER—AN AMERICAN
 AND THE CENTER OF LIFE IN SOUTHERN AMERICAN CULTURE. ECONOMICALLY IT IS TO SOUTHEASTERN
 SOCIETY WHAT THE APOCA WAS TO ANCIENT GREECE. ESPECIALLY IT IS TO SOUTHERNERS WHAT THE BRUNNEN
 IS TO PURITAN NEW ENGLAND. THE STORE STARES HIGH AT A HILL AT THE CENTER OF TOWN WITH ITS TOWER
 WALLS ENVELOPING THE 90'S INSIDE. IT SEEMS THERE ought to BE AFTER-LADEN PROGRESSIVE TINGE
 ON TOP OF THE COLONIAL STRUCTURE AND A RASPY GREEN VALLEY SPARKLED WITH WHITE SPOTS
 AGAINST DEEPER BLUE. SIGNS OF MEDIEVAL LIFE ARE ABSENT, HOWEVER—REPLACED BY A GARGANT
 BELLOW ONLY FACE, WHICH HANGS FROM THE "CASTLE WALLS AND COOPLY STARES DOWN ON AN INDIAN
 AREA OF MARBLE GRAY PAVEMENT. WAL-MART IS TRULY AN AMERICAN EPICENTER. AS I SIT ON MY ENTRANCE SIGN
 I realize that one can learn a lot about AMERICA BY SIMPLY WATCHING PEOPLE AT WAL-MART.
 IT ISN'T JUST A BUSY PLACE. TO MY LEFT IS THE OPEN PORTAL TO A WORLD OF MAYBELLINE MASCARA, RISING
 HILTON, AND LIVE LONGER—ALL BRANCHED IN SOOTHING WHITE FLUORESCENT LIGHT. ON MY RIGHT, THERE
 HE TINTED SUING GLASS WINDOWS. IS A HARSHER WORLD SWIRLING WITH A CHILL AUTUMN WIND AND LET
 LUSHING YELLOW SUNLIGHT FROM MY LEFT. IS THE SCENT I WOULD HAVE DISCOVERED AS A CHILD
 IN A COUNTRY STORE. SMELL—A COMBINATION OF THE SCENTS OF FOOD, CLEANING, GARDENING, AND SOME
 PRODUCTS THAT GENERALLY YIELD A VERY NEUTRAL, NON-OFFENSIVE AROMA THAT IS TRULY BEST DESCRIBED
 AS "COUNTRY STORE SMELL" WHILE HARDLY NOTICABLE IN THE STORE, IT IS EASY TO DISCERN FROM MY POSE
 BECAUSE ITS COOL WIND HITS ME FROM THE RIGHT AND IS FILLED WITH A MORE NATURAL, OUTDOORY SM
 OCCASIONALLY TINGED BY A FURRY WART OR AN INSECT. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THESE TWO SPAC
 ONES INTERESTS ME. THE WORLD ON MY LEFT IS AN ARTIFICIAL WORLD WITH A PERFECTLY CONTROL
 CLIMATE, AS MILING ASSOCIATE ON EVERY CORNER AND AROUND THE CLOCK SERVICE TO MEET YOUR EV
 HUMAN NEEDS AND ASSUAGE EVERY PAIN OF AN INCONVENIENT. IT IS THE UTOPIAN LAND OF THE SATISFIED ON
 RIGHT PROVIDES A MUCH MORE REAL WORLD. A WORLD OF UNSTABLE, UNCONTROLLED, UNPREDICTABLE LAND SC
 PING. ITS TRAVELED, SHOPPING PATHS AND WAYS OF THOUGHT WITHIN THE WALLS OF THE MAMMOTH CONSUM
 SOCIAL ARE OFTEN FORCED TO CONFORM TO THE IDEALS OF CONSERVATION, UNDEARABLE MEAT HAVE, AND
 UNPAID STOLEN PARKING SPACE—IT IS THE WORLD OF THE WORLD. THE WAL-MART TRAVELERS ARE MANY

lights & shadows

WHETHER IT IS THE NEW FATHNI
 BLUE HILL ICE CREAM, AND THOUGHT
 IS A MIDDLE-AGED MAN WHOSE APPEAR
 EASY. IT IS THE KING OF THE SOUTH
 RICH FLUID BUTTON DOWN, AND STRONG WITH F
 LIGHTLY COVER THE 100% COTTON SHIRTS. HE
 TOPPED IN GRAY AND THE 100% COTTON SHIRTS
 LOSE TRAP. MY EYES ARE DRAWN TO HIS
 HIS EYES ARE DRAWN TO HIS EYES AS HE LOS
 WINKING THE FIRST TIME HE WINKS. MY MENTAL WH
 US FOUND BARKING. MY MENTAL WH
 NEDS ON HIS BARKING. MY MENTAL WH
 OTION OF WAL-MART WITH A S
 WENT HUNTING. HE IS THE TYPE OF PERSON
 ET HIS ONE. HE IS THE TYPE OF PERSON
 AL-MART. HE IS THE TYPE OF PERSON
 HIRING. HE IS THE TYPE OF PERSON
 LANK. HE IS THE TYPE OF PERSON
 OF THE MONKEY BARK AND FEELING THE
 MENT, TRYING TO MAKE MYSELF COMFORTABLE. "WH
 AUTOMATIC DOORS OPENING AS I LOOK UP AND SEE
 WITH A WHITE HAIR ENTER THE STORE. SHE CARELESSLY
 UNDER HER NOSE—THE CHEAP KIND OF SUGAR
 THROUGH THE BANK TALKERS WINDOW I AM TRANSPORT
 ER SPIN THE LITTLE WAND OF SWEET STAFFY DELIGHT
 ONTARY BEING FOR A SUGAR OF MY OWN ON THE
 A VERY DIFFERENT PERSONA. SHE IS A TALL, ATHLETIC
 HIGH MILITARY FATIGUES. HER BARK CHOCOLATE SHE

HER TALENTS ARE HIGH. THE FIRST PHO
 SIMILAR CULTURE. HIS SIGN IS BARELY TANNED
 (IF ANY) HAIR IN AN OFFICE BUILDING. HE WE
 AND A PAIR OF OLD TACED BLUE JEANS. WH
 HEAD IS CROWNED WITH SHORT BLACK HAIR THA
 AR WITH A FISHER BACKING—THE KIND I USED TO
 AT HIS COUNTRY HOME BURNING MY CHILDHOOD
 UNDER THE RILL OF HIS CAP AND ANGLER HAVE
 HE PUSHES HIS BUGGY LADEN WITH A LONE ITEM—
 LS OF LUCKY SEEN MUCH FASTER THAN THE GREAT
 TATION. HE IS A CONSTRUCTION WORKER WHO HAS
 BLE PURPOSE—TO GET A BAG OF FOG FOOD FOR
 SON WHO WALKS IN THE STORE AND GOES DIRECTLY
 THE CHECKOUT LINE AS HE WALKS, HE KNOWS
 E TIME BARGAINING AND IS GENERALLY UNFAZZED BY
 HE IS THE BOON FOR SOUTHERN BLUE-COLLARS AND
 AND A SIMPLY CONSERVATIVE LIFE. THE NARROW Y
 REMINDING ME OF ELEMENTARY PLAYGROUNDS
 COMFORT THEY BEAT TO MY POSTERIOR. I SHUT
 OOOOOO! I HEAR THE LONG MECHANICAL SOUND
 A SHORT, KIDGY LADY WITH BENEVOLENT SHOUL
 Y SAUNTERS THROUGH THE DOORS TWELF A PUF
 YOU GET AS A CHILD WHEN YOU RIDE WITH YOUR P
 BACK TO THOSE NOW-DAY DAYS AS I WA
 IN HER MOUTH. HER AMERICAN TALE IS LOST IN
 EELS OF THE GRAPE SUGAR PRINCESS IS A PARAC
 IC AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN SPORTING TIGHTLY
 SUBTLY CONTRASTS WITH THE HOT-LED GREENS.

ATTACHES HER GLAZED LIPS—BOTH OF WHICH MAKE HER
 THE BLACK ENTRANCE MAT WITH A HEAVY, BULL THUD
 HIS WOMAN'S ATTITUDE SCUDS CONFIDENCE THAT BE
 Y EYES TOWARDS THE CRO
 RICAN TALE IS ONE OF FRE
 EYES FALL ON ANOTHER
 DRG AT A PAGE SUITED FOR
 LOOKED AS THEY ORIE
 SOVED RED PLAIN SHIRT WH
 ISSED IN A SIMPLE MULTI-CO
 RAY HAIR IS NEATLY DONE
 IS HIS TREASURE. FOR SOME
 IT IS THE FACT THAT THEY
 DM A BYONE ERA WHEN I
 21ST CENTURY EYES, THE

WHILE AS SHE CROSSES MY PATH, HER FOOTSTEPS
 SHE PLODGE ALONG IN SILENT BLACK SILENCE
 SETS ON DOWN RIGHT INTIMIDATION. SHE GLANCES
 AS I WHISPER A QUICK PRAYER THANKING GOD I
 SM AND PATRIOTISM. THE ARMY WOMAN STALKS I
 RSTING PAIR. THIS TIME IT IS AN ELDERLY, GRU
 NAILS, SLOTHS, AND THAT FIRST POT GET IN 1992. IT
 AST ME. HE WEARS TIGHT FITTING, DARK, SLE
 A PAIR OF BLACK, VELVET ORTHOPEDIC SHOES. AT
 RED, VERTICALLY STRIPED SOCKS THAT SHE PHOEA
 HER DISPOSITION IS FIERCE. THEY SPEAK NO WH
 REASON THEY SEEM OUT OF PLACE. PERHAPS IT IS TO
 ANT HAVE CELL PHONES ALONG TO THEIR EARS. I
 VE YRS SLOWER AND MUCH LESS COMPLICATED. WH
 TWO SEEM STRANGELY AT HOME. MAYBE IT IS BECA
 OPEN MARKETPLACE OF UNFETTERED FREE TRAI
 AND HUSBANDS AND BEST FRIENDS BUD TRYIN
 IS DEEPER THAN MY OWN. MAYBE I SHOULD LEAR
 AMERICAN TALE IS ONE MARKED WITH CONSERVA
 PERCENTER IS A PLACE OF SEEING AND FINDING

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IATION HIS HER GLAZED LIPS--BOTH OF WHICH MAKE HER
HE BLACK BUTTANCE MAT WITH A HEAVY, BULL THUD.
THE WOMANS' CONFIRMED THAT IN
AY--EVIDENTLY, BUT MY EYES TO INSURE THE
I--SHE, HER AMERICAN TALE IS ONE OF THE
N--ATER AND MY EYES FALL ON ANOTHER I
N--THROUGH THE DOORS AT A PAGE SUITED FOR
C--MOVINGLY INTERLOCKED AS THEY CRISP
ER--AND A SMALL-CHEEKED RED PLAIN SHIRT W
S--SHOULD HIS WIFE, DIVINCE IN A SIMPLE MIDDLE-
C--HIS GLEEF, HER CURLY GRAY HAIR IS NEATLY DONE,
U--YOU CAN TELL THAT SHE IS HIS TREASURE, FOR SOME
N--HIDDEN PAGE, PERHAPS IT IS THE FACT THAT THEY
E--EYES THAT THEY ARE FROM A BYGONE ERA WHEN I
E--EYESLY ILL-PLACED TO MY 21ST CENTURY EYES, THIS
B--MART REPRESENTS THE AMERICAN WAY. IT IS AN
E--EYESLY FREEDOM FOR WHICH A GENERATION OF FIRST
P--MAYBE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF THAT FROM
E--FROM THE FRONT THEIR SLUDDY MOVING PLACE, THE
A--LIPS ARE DOING THINGS THE "OLD WAY," WAL-MART
E--A STICK AND A CAME HUNTING FOR LIVE RATTLES
E--IT WILL NEVER! SHE WAS REFERRING TO THE BORN
E--TAIN "WAGGERS," THEY USED RAT LEGS IN AN
E--HER WAS A COLLECTION OF FAITH, GRANDMA DID NOT
E--STERN CHURCH OF GOD, SHE WAS A MEMBER OF THE
A--ANDERKAT CAMPUS AT THE AGE OF SEVENTY-FUR
E--OTHER GRANDMA CAME TO MY WEDDING, I WAS NOT HE
E--ARE TOO MUCH FOR HER EITHER, MY OLDEST BROTHER
E--UNIQUE, SHE BELIEVES THAT BECAUSE MY MOTHER WAS A
E--NPLE AS SHE GROWED MY FAITH, HER BELIEFS, SHE
S--SHE PLODGED ALONG IN SILENT BLACK, SHE WAS A
E--SHE ON DOWN RIGHT INTERIMARITY, SHE WAS ONE OF
E--AS A WHOLE, A HIGH FLYER, THROUGHOUT HER
E--AND PATTERNS, THE FIRST OF THE STRAIGHT BUT
E--WASTING PAIR, THE TIME IT IS AN ELEGANT SCUL
E--TAILS, SLOTHS, AND THAT FIRST NIGHT IN 1942, THE
E--TOLD ME, HE WEARS TIGHT FITTING DARK GLOVES
E--A PAIR OF BLACK WILLYS, COUNTERPUNCH STICKS, AT
E--HIS, VERTICALLY STRUTTING, THAT SHE PRAISES
E--HER DISPOSITION IS FIRM, THEY CHALKING WING
E--REASON THEY SEEM OUT OF PLACE, PERHAPS IT IS THE
E--ANT HAVE CELL PHONE ALLOYS TO THEIR EARS, IT
E--HAS SLOWER AND MUCH, SHE CONCENTRATES WITH
E--WAS SEEM STRANGELY AT HOMES MAY, IT IS BECAUSE
E--FIN MARKETPLACE OF UNFETTERED FREE TRADE,
E--IC AND HUSBANDS AND BEST FRIENDS, SHE TRYING
E--IS DEEPER THAN MY OWN, MAYBE I SHOULD LEARN
E--AMERICAN TALE IS ONE MARKED WITH CONSERVATIVE
E--PERMITS IS A PLACE OF SEEKING AND FINDING, IT
E--I, MAYBE GOD WILL FORGIVE HIM FOR BEING SUCH AN IDIOT
E--WHO LIVED JUST DOWN THE ROAD, BUT THEY WERE NO
E--TION TO THEIR RELIGIOUS SERVICES, WHEREIN HANBLIN
E--STION TO ANY BELIEFS IN GOD, THEIR OWN AND SHE WAS
E--WHERE IT SUITED HER AND WAS DIAGNOSED WITH
E--HE WAS SEVENTY-SEVEN, WHEN SHE DIED, ALONE, HER
E--FAVORITE GRANDCHILD, THAT I HAD, I HAD NO
E--BRIGHT, WAS HER PET AND SHE ALWAYS CALLED HIM
E--MY FIRST SON OF THE ANGELO, HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN

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The award winners are recognized in *Lights & Shadows*.

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Editors Notes

After our lasagna dishes were left to clutter the sink, we (your esteemed literary editors, Candace and Kris) ushered our dinner guest out and sat down with the fattest stack of papers we'd ever seen. The task was daunting. Our collective procrastination had mired us deep into a pit of prose and poetry.

We stumbled over "Merciless" and work skidded to a halt as we called long distance poetry lovers to share our first selection for this year's magazine. The poetry and prose had been divided between us. After reading "Merciless", this division dissolved. We were each dedicated to reading every submission.

From Candace: Reading was once a solitary experience for me. It was an escape. Literature provided a predictable sanctuary. This is no longer true. College has broken open my once comfortable bubble. Reading is a shared experience — a lesson well learned in Oral Tradition.

Joyous things should be spread in communal glory. Go forth into the masses and pour literary fortitude into their ears. Pin them down if you have to. Hell, they might even learn to like poetry, if you take out all the idiocy of puppy-love and starry-eyed lovers.

From Kris: The old adage "Two heads are better than one" certainly proved true for this year's magazine. Combining our different strengths and combating our various weaknesses, Candace and I were able to produce a *Lights & Shadows* that we're excited about. Bantering back and forth about each piece was both entertaining and enlightening. I think the combined effort shows in this year's issue.

I was so impressed with all the talent found in compiling this magazine. These authors struggled to find the perfect phrase, write from different perspectives, and perfect their pieces by studying the complex craft of writing. Their hard work paid off. This magazine made itself. Candace and I were just the lucky ones who got to watch.

And there you have it. Another compilation of the finest art and literature this campus has to offer. We hope you find it alternately thought-provoking, hilarious, unsettling, comforting, and entertaining as we did. Now, write your own masterpiece.

Contents

Literary Selection

David Haws	
<i>In Our Second Poetry Class, We Discuss Revenge Poems</i> -----	2
<i>The New Father Addresses His Son at Feeding Time</i> -----	51
<i>What It Takes</i> -----	52
Tyler Mason	
<i>Photograph of Man in Electric Chair</i> -----	4
<i>Mexico</i> -----	17
<i>Appreciation Piece</i> -----	5
<i>For Falling Apples</i> -----	36
Rhonda Newman	
<i>Alone</i> -----	9
Krystal Terry	
<i>It Was A Normal Day</i> -----	13
<i>Bumper Stickers</i> -----	44
<i>Road Trippin'</i> -----	45
Celinia Stewart	
<i>Merciless</i> -----	16
<i>Words</i> -----	66
Amanda Unger	
<i>Murk of My Garden</i> -----	28
Duffie Marshment	
<i>Letter to my mother-in-law</i> -----	30
<i>Before and After</i> -----	31
<i>Professional Distance</i> -----	32
<i>Coming Clean</i> -----	53
Jenni Higginbotham	
<i>Milk</i> -----	37
Holly R. Dotson	
<i>Conception</i> -----	48
<i>Stretch Marks</i> -----	49
Beth E. Mangham	
<i>He Wrestled Alligators</i> -----	63

Contents

Artwork

Carl Brakin	
<i>Girl with Umbrella</i> -----	1
<i>Untitled</i> -----	50
Christopher Hughes	
<i>Self Portrait</i> -----	3
Glenee Taylor	
<i>Fairy Tales</i> -----	8
Kathy Roush	
<i>Manatee</i> -----	15
Andrew Sutherland	
<i>Unspeak</i> -----	27
Melissa Griffin	
<i>Untitled</i> -----	43
Justin Michael	
<i>Window Light</i> -----	29
<i>Oakland Creek</i> -----	65
Alan Burch	
<i>Artifact</i> -----	47
Amanda Myhan	
<i>Pen Pal</i> -----	61
<i>Haddocks</i> -----	62
Beth Bachuss	
<i>Small Plate</i> -----	70

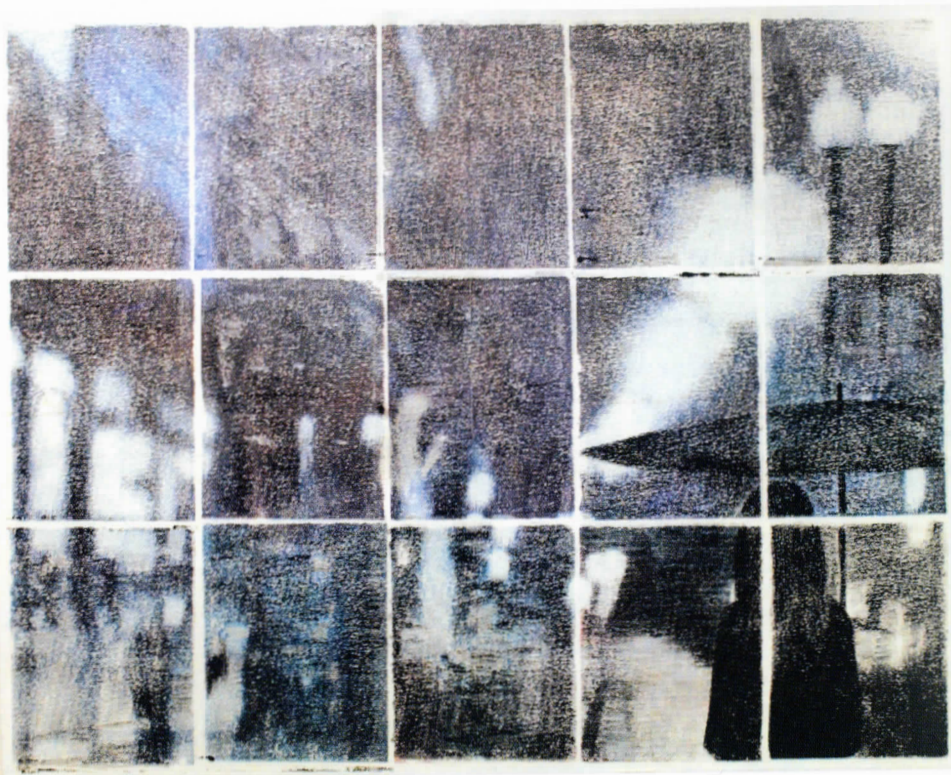


Patricia Wood Robinson

In Memory

The Patricia Wood Robinson Prize was established to honor a University of North Alabama student who was a frequent and valued contributor to *Lights and Shadows*. She exemplified the questing mind and dedication to craft that a fine writer must have. The recipient of the prize is selected by the editors of the magazine. The winner must make a significant contribution to the excellence of the magazine.

This year's recipient is Duffle Marshment.



Girl with Umbrella
 Carl Brakin
 Best of Show

In Our Second Poetry Class, We Discuss Revenge Poems

Those who speak first are in agreement: to write a good revenge poem, one should remain calm, be aloof, appear the bigger man. Use details

that do not inflame. Do not curse, call names, spit, act the fool. Protect your credibility. What I am thinking is that these people must not know

what it is to be so angry that you could take your stepfather's testicles in your own arthritic hands and squeeze them until you black out from the pain

or the sinews in your fingers start to pop. In my revenge poem, I would spit curses as if they were rotten watermelon seeds

and my fat sister would flail herself thin again by knocking the shit out of the man who sent her bawling again and again to her room because she forgot

to roll up the dime-store garden hose or flinched when he poked his calloused finger into her chest to make a point or tossed

her white knee-high go-go boots out of our speeding car because they stunk. In my poem, my stepfather would relive every line of our tedious lives

together and though I would allow him in a refrain to apologize sincerely again and again, my sisters and mother and I would frustrate him

by disappearing every few stanzas or so, and he would be hurt by our absence. He would scan the poem searching for us, but not a single line would give us up,

and when we got good and ready to reappear we would do so loudly, in lines that hissed and popped like the speakers he never allowed us to use

when he was home. Only in the small silences at the ends of lines would he be allowed to approach sleep, and by the end of a very long and repetitive poem

he would be so tired as to seem drunk, and he would finally know in his gut that a wiser man would have used his last dollars to buy our milk instead of his beer.

— David Haws



Self Portrait
Christopher Hughes
1st Place 2D B&W

Photograph of Man in Electric Chair

—from *Photodiscovery*, 1980

Perhaps he is not looking toward the ceiling at all,
just rolling his eyes at the priest or at some joke
the executioners pass among themselves: You hear
the one about the prostitute with the one-legged sister?

Then again, perhaps he is looking somewhere,
toward some unseen window, where four fat
men sit pounding their fists into their hands.

Perhaps his wife and son are in that window,
frightened by the men, but determined to catch one last
glimpse of their husband and father, before returning
home to an empty house and eating a cold supper.

Perhaps he looks across the margin, across to the next page,
where the fisherman's daughter sits, her hands propped,
her legs crossed, her chair, so somber, so inviting.

— Tyler Mason

Appreciation Piece

"My epigraph is from Thucidides"

—Harold Bloom

My epigraph is from an essay by Harold Bloom, an essay in which he laments the current state of poetry as beset on all sides by those who would dare write socially energetic poetry instead of great poetry, which has the ability to be read and reread and reread with pleasure but has no other criteria other than that, except that it looks easy and proves hard, and except that it is not energetic. Of course, I wouldn't have started writing this if I found what he says in the essay all that important. What I find more important is that he stole his first line from Thucidides and I stole my first line from him and that this robbery could go on forever. Someone could steal my first line, and make it their epigraph, just as I stole his:

"My epigraph is from an essay by Harold Bloom"

—Tyler Mason

Or someone could even make a whole poem out of it and step it down the page like so:

My
Epigraph
Is
From
An
Essay
By
Harold
Bloom.

And then because I am not Harold Bloom and am some lowly bum that used to work at Chuck E. Cheese, cooking pizza and cracking jokes about how good the showgirls' (the mere fact that I called them showgirls, when they were showroom girls) asses looked in that Chuck E. Cheese uniform, they would step my name down the page

backward, because maybe I am a backward thinker:

My
Epigraph
Is
From
A
Poem
By
Tyler
Mason.

I wonder if they would call this a great poem. Because what? "Good poets borrow, great poets steal." And the poet who writes this poem has stolen a whole poem, whereas I have just stolen a first line and expounded upon it. I think also it looks easy and proves very hard. Hell, it proves cryptic, because if no one had ever read this, they wouldn't know what the poet was doing. Writing a poem, about a poem that was written about an essay, in which the writer stole an epigraph and then another writer stole an epigraph from the writer who stole that epigraph and all is chaos because he has stolen the whole poem, which makes his poem the greatest of all poems because of T.S. Eliot being born before the poem being written and also that Harold Bloom was born.

And what if the poet stole from me in order to write a whole book. What would he do after this? Brick my name:

T L R M S N
Y E A O

Because this says something we all need to hear. That Tyler Mason doesn't know what he's talking about and that all he is trying to do is get his name into his own poems. That his things go back and forth between each other and he doesn't know if he is writing a poem about poetry or a poem about self-appreciation. And maybe that what I am doing, pushing my name on the unsuspecting reader with each line,

not really saying anything. Trying to put something in their minds that sticks, so that every time they see a dead cat or a loose llama running down the street, they think of Tyler Mason and how wonderful he is, because now it is in their minds after reading this line and I have subliminally programmed the world and maybe one day could take it over if enough cats died.

Maybe that's what this all is about anyway. Dropping names and pushing buttons. Saying socially energetic poetry fails, because it cares too much about other people and not enough about numero uno. Number 1. Me Oh My Oh. The Big Cheese. And that's why I stole the first line from Bloom, who stole his first line from Thucydides, because he recognizes all great poems are about yourself. Now Bloom and I can go down in history together, because we both love ourselves more than anybody else—that is hoping that someday someone reads this and learns that all this is simply about:

Tyler Mason.

Tyler Mason.

Tyler Mason.

Tyler Mason.



Fairy Tales
Glene Taylor
1st Place 3D

Alone

Rhonda Newman

My favorite grandmother did not attend my wedding. She had gotten upset with my mother, her daughter, that day. She called at about one that afternoon because she remembered an appointment she had with her doctor at three, and she expected Mother to take her. My mother and I were finishing things up at my Aunt Jean's, mother's youngest sister, who had graciously offered her home for the reception. Mother's oldest sister, Vadra, was also there. When Jean called Mother to the phone saying "Hassie, it's Mother," she was holding her hand over the mouthpiece as she whispered, "Want me to see what she wants?" Mother just shook her head, walked over to Jean, and took the phone.

Mother had a small smile on her face as she lifted the receiver to her ear "Hello Mother, feeling better today?" she asked. Of course, you knew to ask. Mother just said "aha," and kept nodding her head. "I'll see that you get to your appointment, Mother, now I've got to get back to the kitchen. I'll see you later." She set the receiver down. Jean immediately said Maurice could take her; he was piddling in his shop out back. Vadra said Hillard could take her; it was his turn anyway. No one bothered to call Grandma and tell her. Everyone agreed that mother had not committed herself to take her, just that she would see that she got there. Nevertheless, we knew Grandma would be mad. She would be the center of attention. She would have it no other way. Not even on her favorite granddaughter's special day. Laura Beatrice Vandiver was her name. Everyone called her Beady.

I come from a line of hell raisers, from both sides of the family tree. My grandma Beady outlived three husbands. Out of respect we say three, because no one knows if she married the first one. The last one, the one I knew and called Grandpa, walked off eight years before he died. Garland Tidwell was a good man, but he loved to coon hunt. He owned four coon dogs, which, of course, Beady hated. We lived five hundred yards from Grandma. On school mornings, my brothers and I would stand at the edge of our gravel drive waiting for the bus. We would hear Beady scream at Garland almost every one of those mornings. A typical one began with the dogs. It would start something like this:

"Garland, those stupid dogs of yours started barking their fool heads off before daylight. I tell you I have had it with those mangy mutts. All in the world they are good for is eating and messing up the place. One of these days I am going to take that old gun of yours and shoot every blasted one of them." She would not stop there. She would go on to list his many faults and the actions she was willing to

take if he did not "straighten up." Garland never said a word back to Grandma. He would just take it until he had enough. Then he would hit the back door at full strut and we would know it was over when we heard the screen door slam. One winter day before school let out for Christmas break, Grandpa had his rifle when the screen door slammed. As always, he headed straight toward his dogs' pens, but he first turned to wave at us, just three kids. He usually walked hard and fast, with his head down and kind of tucked in. I believe now he was ashamed, but only because we heard. Then Garland took his gun and he and his dogs walked the seventeen miles to Town Creek where a couple of his children from his first marriage lived. When he left, he and Grandma had been married fifteen years. Grandma always said he would come back, but he never did.

When Hillard went to pick Grandma up for her appointment, she would not let him in. She informed him that she knew her own children did not have time for her. She could die any time and she doubted any one of them could be bothered with her funeral. She would call and cancel. It did not matter what happened to her. Hillard reported that there was no reasoning with her. Vadra called and tried to talk to her, but to no avail. If Mother could not take her, she would not go. I could picture Grandma standing there in her doorway, holding the screen, her big black patent leather purse hanging inside the curve of her elbow, keeping Hillard on the porch. Her lipstick red, thin lips moving furiously over blistering words. Mother was in the bathroom, crying. I called Grandma later after everyone calmed down before we went to the church. I asked if we could pick her up on the way. She informed me she would not be going. I held the phone, thinking how she had not come to my bridal shower, either.

I stayed most nights with my grandma after Garland left. She did not like being alone at night, or for that matter, daytime either. The two of us amazed the rest of the family. No one before had gotten along with her so well, so long. However, I had all of someone's attention at Grandma's house, and I loved her stories of the people we both knew and the many I did not. On summer evenings and into the crisp fall we would sit in the tall wooden rockers on her front porch which was twelve feet wide and ran the length of the house. While we ate popcorn and drank Pepsi gone flat, Grandma would deepen the dark stains on neighbors' and relatives' laundry. She would talk about Garland and how he would come back and oh, the things she had to say to him. "I may not let him come back," she would say. "He's the very devil anyway. Who ever heard of a grown, God-fearing man catching rattlesnakes and then selling them to Satan worshipers?"

What could he be thinking? Here is an old man tramping around in the woods with a stick and a cage hunting for live rattlers. Maybe God will forgive him for being such an idiot but I will never." She was referring to the Bordens who lived just down the road, but they were not Satan worshipers. They used rattlesnakes in some of their religious services wherein handling them was seen as a sign of faith. Grandma did not cotton to any beliefs except her own and she was a stern Church of Christ. She chewed plug tobacco when it suited her and was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer at the age of seventy-four. She was seventy-seven when she died, alone.

My other grandma came to my wedding. I was not her favorite grandchild but that was okay. I did not care too much for her either. My oldest brother, Dwight, was her pet and she always called him Junior. She believed that because Dwight was the oldest son of the only son, he should have been named after my dad's father, Tee. Tee Monroe. I still do not believe that is the real reason because everyone knows she hated that man. As long as I can remember, Papa lived with one or the other of their five children, most of the time with us. Although they never divorced, I never knew them to live together. It seems Grandma did not have a good outlook on anything and felt God had cheated her in the life she had chosen, and she took it out on Tee. Tee took to drinking and was never there for his kids when they were growing up, but they loved him anyway. They believed she shared the blame of his leaving. Her name was Cora Elvira Waldrep. Everyone called her Cor.

My wedding was a happy event, even without one grandma, but I felt her absence. I missed her presence then and I miss it even more now, twenty years later, when I flip through the photographs of my wedding. I had an eight by ten made of the one with Grandma Waldrep standing between my new husband Mike and me, and gave it to her one Christmas. I have never given her any gift that seemed to please her as much. I went to see her in the nursing home on the Easter Sunday the day before she died. The first words she spoke to me as I entered her room were "Where is Junior?" She had been in that nursing home for six months, and "Junior" never went to see her, yet he remained her favorite. After she died, her children went through her things and divided them out. She was a pack rat and would never give or throw away anything. I was given letters I had mailed to her when we lived in Chicago and I was four and five years old. She had hung on to every gift children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, neighbors and friends had given her over the years. She had survived: two children, five bouts with cancer, losing a kid-

ney at age fifty and both breasts before she reached sixty-five. She had hoed and picked both cotton and pepper to feed her five kids. The snuff she dipped came in a small glass jar. She kept a plastic spoon with most of the handle broken off buried in the jar to scoop out the snuff. The jar on her night stand held only tiny grains and the empty bowl of a broken plastic spoon when the cancer she battled so hard and so long finally tired her out. She was eighty-six when she died, alone.

I told my husband before we married that there would be times I would try to make him leave. We dated for over four years so he knew I was giving fair warning. Mike spent time with all my family, both sides. All welcomed him and over the years, he learned most of our dirty secrets and heard our hateful words. He knew both grandmothers well and still believed he could live with their granddaughter. Many times, I have tried him. For the most part, I work diligently to escape my heredity. I have learned, though, you cannot be anyone except the person you are. My grandmothers will always be part of my identity. I have inherited body and facial features from both, along with personality traits. However, my grandmothers were not mean women. At least I do not believe so. They were strong women with great passion, tied with heavy ropes of nerve, unable to express their need. Both came from large families, raised large families of their own, and became, once again, one of many. I recognized early my need for undivided attention and vast amounts of time alone. I choose not to have children. Although I have patterned my life to be opposite from theirs, there have been times I have screamed at my husband. There have been times I told him to leave. So far, he has refused to go. He is a good man, does not drink much and does not hunt. Most of the time, I hope he stays; sometimes I do not care if he leaves. I realize now that when my life is over, like all earthly possessions, I will leave him behind. When my final breath has been taken, I will die as my grandmothers did, as we all must die, alone.

It Was A Normal Day

Krystal Terry

December 29, 2000, I sat in the emergency room beside my father's bed; blood was squirting out of the side of his face as the nurse casually stitched him up. "He's going to be all right?" I asked.

The nurse looked at me and nodded. Without hesitation, I got up and found the nearest toilet. I spent the next ten minutes vomiting up everything that was inside me, except the fear. I sat down on the floor and replayed the events that had led me to the emergency room with my dad that night. It was a normal day.

It was a normal day. The night before, my dad had bought my mom a new car—a belated Christmas present. That afternoon she and I had gone to Moulton to get the insurance and tag. We came back to the gas station she owns and ate the soup she'd cooked for supper. We lived right next door, and it seemed like I'd spent most of my life at that store. After supper, I went home. An hour or so later, I lay on the couch, bored with evening TV. I decided to go back to the store and hang out for a while. I walked across the parking lot and saw a red Chevy Cavalier sitting near the door. I stepped inside the door and froze. My dad was pinned to the floor and there was a man on top of him. They were fighting. There was blood everywhere. Everywhere. It was not a normal day any more.

It was not a normal day any more.

"What the ...?" I asked. At that moment I saw my mom bring a stool down across the back of the guy's head.

She screamed, "Leave him alone!" It finally sank in, what was happening. This guy was trying to rob the store. Without thinking, I ran behind the cash register. *The gun. Is it there?* It was. I grabbed it and pulled out, pointing it at the guy.

"Get off him!" I said, the nose of the .38 revolver aimed at the robber's head, "Get the off him or I'll blow your goddamned head off." He slowly eased up.

"Don't shoot me," he said.

"Call the cops," I yelled at my mom.

It was not a normal day any more. He took a step towards me and I backed up.

"I'll kill you." I said. My dad was still on the floor. The blood was his. The robber turned and ran out the door. My mom was on the phone with the police. I called out the tag number and a description of the car to her. My dad got up and I helped him to my mom's new car. I drove him to Decatur General that night. I'd been to that hospital a thousand times, yet I couldn't remember the way; my dad had to give me directions. It was not a normal day any more.

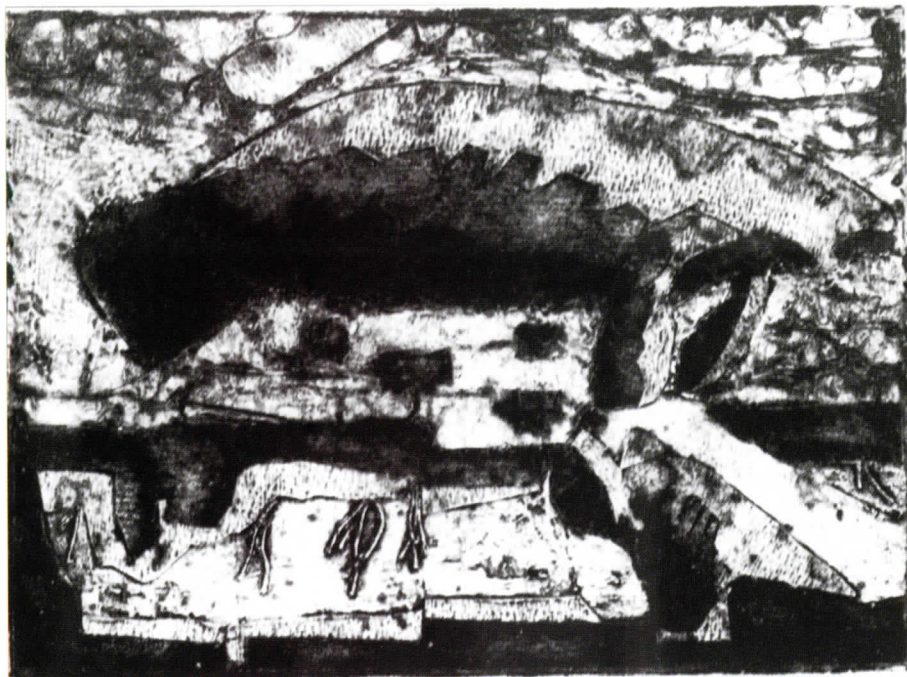
My dad was bleeding profusely. In the scuffle he had been cut from his earlobe to his chin with a box-cutter. The robber had aimed for his throat but missed. My dad told me exactly what happened. The robber turned out to be a regular customer and son of a close acquaintance of my parents. He came in, claimed he lost his wallet and asked to use the phone. He went back out to his car, and then came back into the store with a shotgun. He demanded that my mom and dad get on their knees at the back of the store. When my dad grabbed the shotgun, they began to wrestle. The shotgun broke and the robber pulled out a box-cutter. He sliced several times at my father's neck before catching him from ear to chin. That's when they fell and my mom hit the robber with the stool as I walked in. After my dad told me the story, he looked over at me, his clothes soaked with blood.

"You did good," he said.

"I love you." I said.

"I love you, too," he said. That was probably the first time we had exchanged those words in five years. It was not a normal day anymore.

It was not a normal day anymore. At the emergency room, my dad got 52 stitches. The robber was caught hiding in the closet of a relative's house. He confessed and is now serving two 25-year sentences concurrently: one for armed robbery and one for attempted murder. A few weeks later, my dad and I went to do some target practice. The .38 from the store misfired twice before it shot. Now I know just how hard it is to survive a normal day.



Manatee
Kathy Roush
2nd Place 2D B&W

Merciless

*"I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful—a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild."*

— John Keats

She stole him right out from under me. No
Sooner than I left for the mall, she swooped
In and grabbed him. That damn fairy.

He always loved long hair and looked at me
Numbly when I chopped mine off. It weighed
My head down and he always pulled it, hard.

But hers hangs to her knees, raising all kinds
Of questions about her daily functions. Do
Fairies have daily functions? Fairy bitch.

My mother warned me: *Never leave a man to
His own devices, another woman is waiting.*
He promised that he was different.

A good man, honest and stable. Maybe a
Little kinky. Some of the things he asked
Me to do were just weird. That long hair.

Perhaps fairies willingly behave like whores,
I don't care to know. She probably wraps
That long hair around... never mind.

My cousin saw him down by the lake. He
Looked pale, haggard. Too much of a good
Thing? He did not speak and he wobbled.

His precious fairy emerged from the trees
And touched his sleeve. His face flushed
And his lips stretched in a painful smile.

They disappeared. As a girl, I pulled the
Wings off of butterflies. That was just
Practice.

—Celinia Stewart

Mexico

Tyler Mason

We are fifty miles from home when the Ford putters out. On the *putt-putt*, Hank pulls onto the shoulder of the road, grimaces, and the Ford goes dead. Hank looks at me and punches the dash with his fist. Two miles before that, Hank had said that we were almost out of gas. That we need to find a station soon or we'll be stranded here in God knows where. "I don't know how much farther we can make it," and so on. So we drove, searching for stations, but there were none in sight and even if we had saw a sign for one, we wouldn't have made it, because they were all two miles off the road.

Two miles later we are there on the shoulder, out of gas, and stranded fifty miles from home. Across the road, a pasture full of cattle eats grass. On our side, Rosa curses at Hank in Mexican and Hank gets out of the Ford and kicks one of its tires. "Shit," he says, and he goes around the Ford, kicking tires and saying shit, and finally at the bumper, he kicks it and says, "goddamn truck." By that time, I have hopped out of the Ford and am kicking tires with him, only lighter and more resigned, not saying shit, just kicking. Rosa and her short, pink mini-skirt follow behind me, except she never kicks. She just says something here and there in Mexican.

Rosa says something across the Ford to Hank and he says, "That's fine." Like that, "Fine." Just like an old beaten man talking to his wife: Well, yeah, that's fine. The old man gets a big bulk of confidence in his chest and says, Oh, yeah, and just lets it taper off with, that's fine. Hank says it like that to Rosa. She goes and sits under a big oak tree on our side of the road. Hank knows Mexican because he had two years of it in high school, and he yells something out after her, *adios amigo* or something. Hank says to me after Rosa runs off, "I'll get the gas. You stay with Rosa." He doesn't wait for a reply. He goes off down the road. I go to the oak tree and sit by Rosa.

About three days and fifty miles ago, Rosa came up to me and said, "Today's special is roast beef sandwich." This was before I'd ever heard a word she said, and it was just after catching sight of her in her pink apron and hair bun. She worked at the Downtown Deli and looked nice in her apron and hair bun. "On sourdough," she added, slurring horribly over sourdough and while she slurred over sourdough—poof! I was in love. After I ate, I was still in love and I asked Rosa to love me back. She nodded her head, so I smiled at her and went home. Three days later, Leonard tells Hank and me to get

his girlfriend, Sandy, from Tutwiler Prison and we try to figure out why, since she beat the hell out of him with a toaster and that's what got her in Tutwiler in the first place. But Leonard says, "Go, now," holding out his big index finger like a finger of God. So we load the truck with sack suppers, and because I have just met Rosa in the deli three days ago and am in love, with Rosa, and with fishing poles, just in case we have some extra time to fish. The car cranks pretty good, just a little trouble. So then, with the suppers, Rosa, and the fishing poles loaded, we are off toward Wetumpka.

Soon I am losing Rosa to Hank because of his John Denver tape. He plays it, rewinds a track and plays it again, only because Rosa seems to love the melody of "Leaving on a Jet Plane." I know I am losing her because the air conditioner doesn't work and because my window won't roll down. Rosa leans out Hank's window, over him, and I see the big smile come over his face. Sometimes they rub up against each other and giggle like crazy. Fifty miles later, we are stranded and Hank is gone to get gas. And I think, maybe, Hank has lost it all with Rosa.

Under the oak tree, Rosa motions for me to lay my head on her breast. When I do, and I nestle myself between the mountains of her green tank top, she screams, "*bajar, bajar*" and smacks me in the head with her arms. Hank is down the road. He hears Rosa's screaming of *bajar* and comes back to see just what in the hell I have done.

"What the hell did you do?" he says. I am off her when he gets back. "Did you try to rape her," he says and I say that I never touched her.

"She just started screaming for no reason. Stupid girl is crazy." She looks frightened, I don't know why and she goes to Hank.

He holds her and says, "Well, I can't leave you with her right now. Not after this." And I think, I have more of a right to touch her, more a right than he did, holding her now in a bear hug, protecting her from me, her would-be lover—the guy who invited her on this trip in the first place. And just why did she want to come, if not for me and the possibility of maybe being stranded under an oak tree?

So fifty and three-tenths miles from home, I am alone with my thumb out and with all these wealthy folk passing me in their brand-new cars that have yellow lights that flicker up on the dash when you are even fifty miles from empty. And a hearse passes me, and more lighted cars, all in a line this time. Three-tenths of a mile back, a white van pulls out of the line and behind the truck. I am not stopping though; I just want gas. If he wants to help, he can come down the road. I keep my thumb held out and keep walking. At fifty and four-tenths, the van leaves our truck. I see a couple of waves from the peo-

ple in the van. Then it is up to me. It stops beside me. A guy sticks his head out the window. "Your brother and his girlfriend said you need a lift," he says. The pasture is still on the other side of me, and nothing on this side.

I say, "Yeah, I could use a lift, sir, if you don't mind," and you know, making a big suck-up scene, because I am tired of walking.

He gets out and opens the sliding door. "If I minded," he says, "I wouldn't have asked." I get in. A baby is in the back. It smells like baby shit, but nobody says nothing about changing it, so I just kind of rub my nose into my sleeve.

"Thanks," I say to the man, as he shuts the door. He goes back around to the driver's side, and when we are driving down the road, he says, "You got a can," and that baby starts crying.

"For what?" I say.

"Gas. Shush honey, we'll stop soon," he says.

"Honey, pull over a moment," his wife says.

"No, I got no can for gas."

"That's fine. I'll go to where you can get one," he says and to his wife, "Honey, she can wait just a second, until we get to the station." And I say that it would be great and his wife gives me an ugly look. I want to add, going to a station where they sell gas cans, but I don't. And anyways his wife doesn't glare at me long and before we get to the gas station, the baby has stopped crying but still stinks.

I get the can and the gas at Pete's Big Truck Stop, just a few miles up from the Ford. It costs six bucks for three gallons and a three-gallon can. That brings me to ten for the rest of the trip, which doesn't really matter much, because the rest of the gas is on Leonard and we got sack suppers. While at the station, the man gets out and changes the baby on the back seat of the van, exposing that baby's ass to everybody in the free world. He does the job though, because when I get back in the van, the baby shit smell is gone and all I can smell is the gas in the can I just bought.

Driving back to the Ford, the guy is a lot more talkative. We don't have that far to go, so he doesn't have much time to say what he wants. He asks me where we are going, and I tell him to Wetumpka and he says why and I say to pick up a relative and he nods.

"Family is important. Remember that."

When he says that, we are back, ten miles later, to where Hank stranded the Ford and I never have time to say she is not really family, only a father's girlfriend I don't know all that well. Hank and Rosa sit under the tree, looking real flirtatious and all, and I feel sort of sick, but I get out, act real nice, and thank the man for the ride.

"You're a lifesaver," I say.

He says, "Yeah, a cherry one. No problem," and I realize he's dressed in Sunday clothes and so is his wife. I figure he is just one of those loony Adventists that have Saturday church. They always seem kind. Before I mention it though, he pulls off in the direction we went to get the gas.

After the white van is gone, Hank and Rosa come up from the oak tree.

"Good you got the gas," etc, etc, etc, Hank says.

Rosa doesn't say anything to me. She just says some Mexican to Hank and he nods. All the while, I empty the can into the tank, and Hank says "It would have been a good time to fish, 'cept there was no pond."

We lost probably about an hour and we were running late before the breakdown. So Hank is in a real hurry. Rosa pulls at her green-tank top and grins a bit at me. Something changes in her all of a sudden, but maybe I just imagine it.

"I'll make sure I keep a close eye on the gas from now on," Hank says when we are driving again.

"Right," but I know Hank is an idiot.

At 152 miles, I eat my sack supper and say that I am eating Sandy's too, if nobody cares.

"Pass me mine," Hank says. "Give Rosa's hers." I reach down and hand out the suppers. "I want Sandy's Twinkies. You don't need those things anyway. Do you even like them?"

We pull into Tutwiler Prison's parking lot two hours late. Sandy sits by the fence, smoking a cigarette. When she sees us, Sandy gives us a long middle finger and sticks her tongue out at the Ford. Hank shakes his head and sticks it out the window. "Sandy, get your ass over here," but she doesn't look at him. She turns like she never heard a word. Inside the Ford, Hank says, "Let's leave her. She can find her own way home."

I get out of the car and chase her down, because hell, I never thought about it, but I think I could love Sandy, if I did not love Rosa and that's not going so well, she's probably leaving me for Hank soon or she has already. Sandy is only eleven years older, anyway, too young to be with my father. And often, I remember I would want to look at her, even though she's my father's girl. But that's normal I think, and maybe it is just because she is there in our house and she is a woman and not blood. She is not beautiful, at least, not in my eyes. She just is. I'd rather not deal with Leonard either, if Sandy doesn't

come home and we do. That's why I get out when Hank is doing all his talking in the Ford. I get out to save myself from Leonard. I only realize I get out of the Ford because I maybe love Sandy, after all this. After we get home from Tutwiler and I am sitting on the front porch.

"Who's Pocahontas?" Sandy says, when I finally catch up to her. She draws her lips in a tight line, and places her hands on her hips. When I don't answer, she finally turns and looks at me. "Where the hell am I going to sit? Not in the back, that's for damn sure. Where the hell is Leonard?" And I can't keep up with it all. Not now. Not when I am out of breath and trying to rescue her from being deserted by Hank.

Finally, Hank walks over. He stands beside me. And Sandy seems even less happy then before. "How was prison?" Hank says like he is a thwarted lover, who she wronged and because of that she landed in jail. Like now he has his revenge and if she ever wrongs him, she'll go back to jail because he is in tight with the judge of the county. And that's kind of the way it is. Hank works with the judge's son at Wrangler, and he is always saying he's going to have me put in prison if I ever piss him off.

Sandy looks at Hank. Usually, she would crush him, but this isn't the time, she doesn't want to be back in Tutwiler before she leaves the parking lot. "That's something you shouldn't ask," she finally says. She is reserved, but it is in the parking lot and when we get in the car, things are bound to change. But now, we are in the parking lot and things don't change and she simply looks like she wants to cut his balls off. Out of the parking lot, she would cut his balls off.

Pocahontas can sit in my lap, I say, answering one of her questions.

"She'll break you," Sandy says. This is a possibility, because Hank's girlfriend one time, sat on me, and broke a hip. The girl was light, but I was lighter and weak boned. Rosa's much bigger than the girl who broke my hip, and I haven't grown much. But I have grown some and Sandy has just seen me for the first time in a year. I hadn't visited her after she had broken my father's head with a toaster, mainly because of school, but father never lets me visit her the whole time she is away. Though finally when she gets out of prison, he says, I need a piece of ass around here and that is why it is Saturday, and we go get Sandy. Then there's the fact that I am never around that much before that – after breaking my hip, I go to the hospital. Sandy is in prison when I get out. Maybe she doesn't know my bones are not so brittle any more, even though surely she sees I have been in the gym, put on some weight, though, yeah, it's very little.

"She'll sit in my lap," Sandy says and eyes Rosa over, to see if

the weight would work. Rosa and Sandy are no slouches. Both are bigger than Hank and me, but Hank and me never had much in the way of size anyway.

"Fine," fine, Hank says, and that is me repeating after him, because we want to get on the road, now, it is late and we are two hundred miles from home. We wouldn't mind catching one of those ballgames with Leonard, too, if we could and that would mean leaving now. At this point, we are of one mind, Hank and me.

Climbing in the car, Sandy hurriedly shoves me, which is not what you would expect, since she spent so long arguing the sitting position we would all take, but she's like that, a shover when she needs to be. Rosa climbs in on top of her and their bodies squish together. Rosa's knees crunch against the dashboard. Then we are driving down the road and Sandy starts sweating, because "Rosa's no twig," she says, and "I am no twig either."

Hank and me forgot to mention the lack of air conditioner to Sandy. Sandy complains her head off, and this is where we hit a deer but I'm saving this for the end. Sandy complains really loud one time, yells across Hank about how the hell Leonard could send us with a truck that didn't even have any air conditioner and all that, and then this little deer steps out into the road and Hank doesn't even see it. That's how he hits it, but I'll save the rest.

After the deer, Sandy is complaining about how hungry she is. Rosa still cries about the fawn, I think, at least, she cries for the fawn. She and Hank jibber-jabber back and forth across me.

"I haven't had a good meal in a year," Sandy says over Rosa's Mexican. "Let's eat."

"No," Hank says and talks with Rosa, trying to keep his voice above Sandy's.

"I know a little place up here; let's go get some food," Sandy says.

"Yeah," I say. "Let's get a driving, I'm tired of burger." And this is probably the funniest thing that happens the whole trip because Sandy laughs, Hank laughs and Rosa, who really doesn't understand a word I said, starts laughing and forgets why she was yelling in Mexican. I guess it's because everybody else is laughing and Rosa figures she might as well join in.

So Hank says "Fine. Where is it?" And Sandy pats me on the leg for the saying the right things.

"I want you to know things are going to be different," Sandy says, just after Hank. "I met a man in prison and he changed my life. He told me to marry your father and adopt you boys." And Hank maybe laughs a little harder than before when I said that stuff about the burger. "You

don't want me for a mother?" she says.

"We're too old," Hank says. "You need to have some kids of your own, before you dry up." Out of the corner of my eye, I see Rosa jump a little. Sandy's knee must have kicked up in anger. Hank pushes in Denver. *I'm leaving on a jet* — Rosa bobs up and down with the rhythm. Sandy stops the tape. She puts the channel to gospel and hums *Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, sweetest name* ... along with the radio, as if in retaliation. As if "Leaving on a Jet Plane" threatened Hank's and my souls.

"You boys need this," and she pats me on the leg again. "You boys could use a little religion. I don't want pagans for children."

And because it is Saturday and not Sunday, Hank isn't in the mood. This is where Hank and me split. Later, I think, maybe that is why this is a fairy tale. If Hank doesn't say what he says, we are still close, still want to get home and watch the game, and he feels so bad about taking Rosa from me that he never takes her. "Fuck religion," he says. I shake my head in condemnation. "Jesus, too."

"Oh hell, Hank," and Hank hits me. And now he can take Rosa.

"God-dammit Hank," Sandy says and she lets it go, because she sees the turn. "Turn here, turn here. Hurry, turn here."

Sandy points to the left, and Hank turns onto a dirt road and immediately hits a bump. Rosa cusses some more in Mexican, and when Hank hits another bump, she grinds her entire body in the windshield. The Ford pops up and down and almost shakes the bed loose. "Where you taking us?" Hank says.

"Turn at the tree that looks like Jesus, you'll see it when it comes up. I bet you wouldn't even know Jesus if you spotted him in the flesh," she says, "So the rest of you keep a look out for the pagan." And when we get there, it looks like the Son of God, for sure, at least after we hit a few more bumps.

Hank says, "It looks more like Elvis than Jesus."

Sandy tells him to just shut the hell up and turn at the tree. "I already know about you and Jesus." And when we go down that road there's a little burned-down cabin of a restaurant.

"It looks like hell run over twice," Hank says. I nod, but I am not going to say that with Sandy there.

"You would know," Sandy says.

Inside two men in guard uniforms sit at the counter, drinking coffee, eating sandwiches. These guys look like they recognize Sandy. She smiles at them as soon as we walk in. And suddenly, Sandy no longer looks like she loves Jesus and she walks up to the two guards and says to me as she is walking out back with them, "I need to go talk to these

guys. Order me something, sweetie."

"Yeah," I say. "Sure. What you want?" But she is already gone out the door. So I decide I will just order her something like she said.

We sit down at a little rickety table near the back. The waitress comes over and I order a steak sandwich. I say keep the steak medium-well. I order Sandy the same, except I don't say medium-well. The waitress says, "Medium-well," and I say whatever is fine. Hank orders himself a steak sandwich too. He orders Rosa a salad and sits beside her.

When the waitress leaves, Hank says, "Let's go." But that religion-hater can just sit there. I see his hand on Rosa's leg. I have lost Rosa and right then I tell Hank I hate him and that we can't leave Sandy. Rosa sits there looking stupid during all of this.

"Dad'll kick our ass," I say.

"Let's just go," he says. "I don't like this place." But I am putting my foot down on this one. "I don't give a shit if dad kicks our ass or not," he says.

"Yeah, well I do," I say and we stop talking. Rosa plays with her straw.

Soon, we get our food. I eat on the steak sandwich, but it tastes like the restaurant. After a few bites, Rosa looks sick from her salad. Hank doesn't see a bathroom and I ask the waitress where one is. She points toward the back and Rosa goes off toward where Sandy went out with the two guards.

When Rosa is gone for about fifteen minutes, I am about to go check on her. Hank says, "No let me go." I say fine, and he's off. I pick some at my steak sandwich and think about just how long it will take to get back home. After a few bites, Sandy sits down next to me.

"Let's go to Mexico," she says.

"What?"

"Run away with me to Mexico," and she calmly takes a bite of her steak sandwich. "This is terrible."

"Why Mexico?" I say.

"Why not Mexico?" and she grabs Rosa's salad. She takes a few bites. "Let's go. Now, before Hank and Pocahontas get back."

"I can't," I say. "I got school Monday. It's my last year. If I miss another time, I'll fail. After this month. I can go then. Just wait one month."

Sandy gets right in my face. "It's now or never," she says. "Mexico or home. I can go back to Leonard just fine. Thought I'd give you a chance." Right then I am sure I am in love with Sandy and I am about to say, "let's go" but it's too late, because Hank and Rosa are back.

He says, "Let's go," and this time we go.

On the drive back, Sandy makes us stop and get some beer. When we get home, Sandy goes into the house. By the Ford, Hank kisses Rosa, and he comes over and tells me he and Rosa are getting married and that he will carry her home. "So don't worry about it," and "Do we have your blessing?"

"Whatever," I say. Rosa says something to me and they leave in the Ford. When I walk into the house, I hear Sandy telling Leonard, she wants to get married. She squats over Leonard doing some kind of little dance. Leonard grabs her hips.

"We'll think about," he says, and then he tells me to go get us some beer. The beer is in the truck. The truck is gone. I go outside, sit on the front porch, and listen to Leonard and Sandy in the room. The football game plays on the TV, and I wonder how Leonard can concentrate.

I'll end this thing with a dead fawn. This, of course, is not where I wanted to end. I wanted to end with Sandy and me sucking spaghetti in some restaurant in Mexico. Each of our lips at the end of a noodle, slowly crawling toward each other until they meet, like that scene in *Lady and the Tramp* with the two mutts. Except we are in a nice restaurant. I wanted to end this with that, and end it with me kissing Sandy passionately, a nice long kiss, after our lips meet in the middle of the spaghetti noodle. Then we are up in the hotel room. It is hot and I am kissing the sweat off her. Drop after drop, kiss after kiss. Sandy says, "You are such a good kisser. Wherever did you learn such a skill?" I wanted to end this with my arms around her in that hotel room and with her embracing me when we made it to Tutwiler prison. Instead, when we pull into Tutwiler's parking lot two hours late, she flicks us off, and Hank cusses at her through the window, but I didn't know then that I wanted to end this story without all that. I didn't know that until we are home and I sit alone on the front porch, waiting on Hank to return with the Ford and the beer, listening to Leonard and Sandy in the den.

Yeah, there's a lot of kissing and hugging, some lovemaking and in truth, even though I end up alone on the front porch, I guess everything turns out pretty nice. Wrapped up nicely, you know, a marriage proposal sealed with a kiss by the Ford and a free ride home—actually, two of those marriage proposals, though one without the free ride home, because that's where they are when she asks. Home. And because of that I like to think maybe this is a fairy tale of some kind, because on the day Sandy got out of prison, it was a Saturday and Saturday was the day Hank had off from the Wrangler factory, I had off from school, and Rosa had off from deli. Saturday was the day of the ballgames, and the day the Chevy was in the shop, so that

Leonard needed Hank and me to get Sandy in the Ford. Saturday was the day Rosa had nothing better to do than go with Hank and me to Tutwiler. Everything worked out like that, except that it's not quite that nice, at least to me. And I guess is why I choose to end this fairy tale with a death, even though it doesn't come in order or even mean anything much, other than this isn't one of those fairy tales where everyone ends up happily ever after.

After we get Sandy from Tutwiler, Hank runs the Ford into a baby deer. It stands up for a second after being blown to the ground. It looks around, looks at the truck, and then falls down dead. A bloody mess. Rosa cries a lot, and Sandy curses, mostly curses at Rosa and Rosa's crying and Rosa's jumping up and down in her lap. I end up dragging the dead fawn to the shoulder, getting a little blood on my hands and having to wash them in a puddle before I get back in the car. That's it. Hank puts the Ford in drive and we leave the deer there on the shoulder of the road, homeless, motherless, lifeless. I tell that to say this story is sometimes like a dead fawn on the shoulder of the road. Because what can a fawn do to anybody? It's a love story, though. I realize this when Hank comes to me a few years later and his new baby has been born. He says, "I've never been so happy in my life," and I realize that above all those things: heartbreaks, dead fawns, broken-down trucks, prisons; above all that, this is a love story because Hank holds the baby in his arms, and the baby makes Hank a new person, like he'd never sinned, never stolen a woman from his brother, never tried to ditch Sandy at Tutwiler. That's when I realize it. I've been looking at this thing so wrong. I'm not saying it's pretty. I'm just saying I was looking at it wrong. Like I looked at having to move the deer wrong. And maybe I am wrong for wanting to start this with Sandy and me kissing in Mexico. But when that baby is out of Hank's arms, I know I wanted this thing to end with Sandy, me, and spaghetti in Mexico, and Hank and Rosa stranded in some broken-down restaurant just outside Wetumpka.



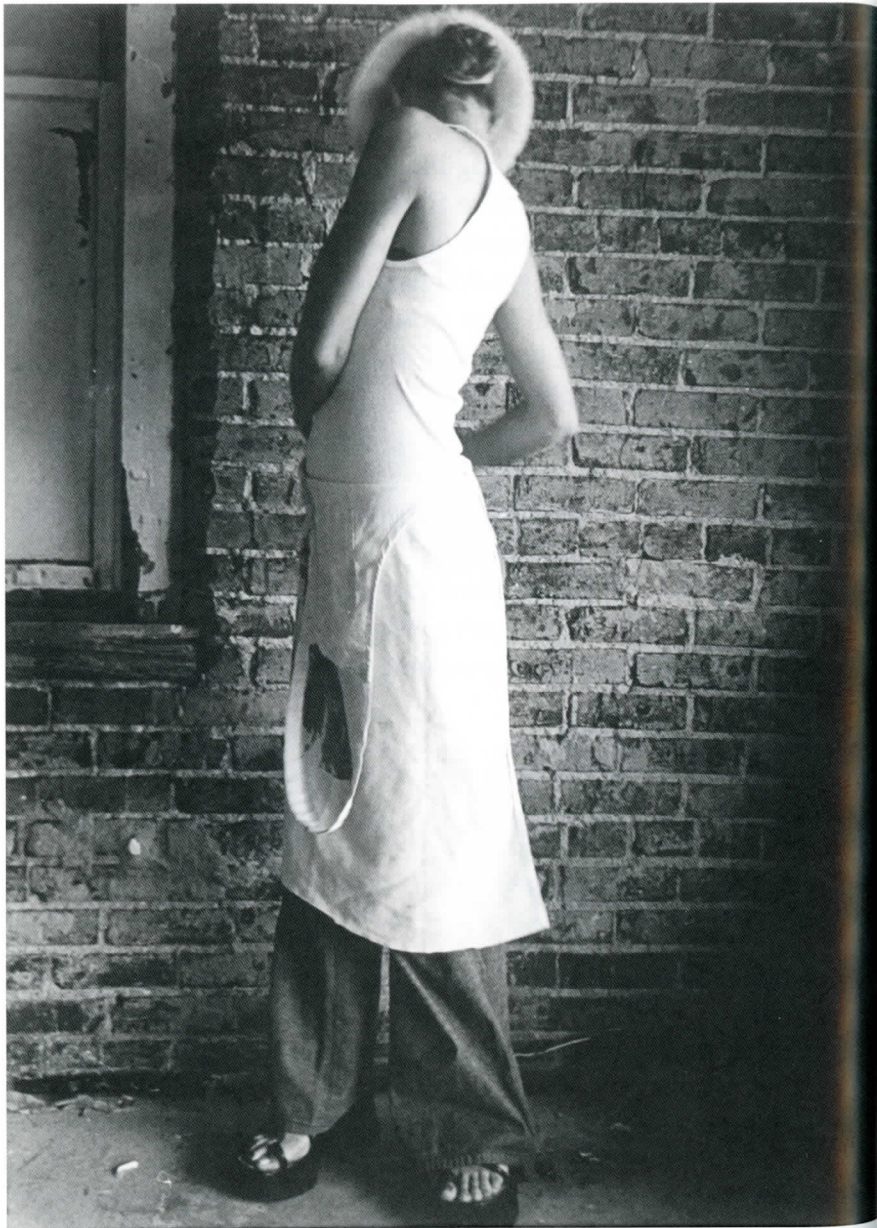
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Andrew Sutherland
2nd Place 3

Murk of My Garden

The phrase "murk of my garden" is from a poem by Colette Inez.

That time of year when nothing blooms.
Even the chrysanthemums have fizzled.
The moon shines into the murk of my garden
Turning dried leaves into gnarled hands.
The arbor, once alive with blue morning glories,
Sways slightly under its burden of dead vines.
The dogwood stands naked, shivering
As the wind whistles through its branches.
The cricket's song has ceased,
And the birdhouse tenants left long ago
To search for sunlight and warmth.
The black widow has abandoned its web,
And the smell of the dank earth rises,
It's a wonder anything ever grew here.

—Amanda Unger



Window Light
Justin Michael
Merit Award

Letter to my mother-in-law

She still writes me on occasion
even though the bond between us
has been broken by death.

She tells me she feels sad now
and writes the name of an antidepressant
so familiar that I can't remember if I have taken it
or if just the people I love have.

I want to tell her how my writing class helps me
say the things I am afraid for God to hear,
how it helps me deal with my new reality.
Instead, I send her a watered-down
version of a poem that blames no one
for what we have become.

—Duffie Marshment

* Duffie Marshment is the recipient of the
1st Annual Patricia Wood Robinson Award

Before and After

He was eight when he became hers
the lost son of her lost daughter.
*Lord, my heart ain't strong enough
to handle that boy she would tell her cronies.*

She remembers the last trip up to the school
and the long lecture from the principal about discipline
*Yes, sir. I understand. It's been hard since Al passed,
with my bad heart and all. Okay. Thank you.*

She felt her heart beating harder than usual.
as she collected her grandson and returned home.
*I tell you, you are just like your mamma,
and gonna be the death of me.*

But she got herself too worked up yelling.
Her chest started to ache.
*Just go to your room.
And you can forget about supper tonight.*

She put a nitroglycerine tablet under her tongue
and waited for the pain to stop.
*I don't know what I'm going to do with you, boy.
You bring me nothing but grief.*

When she thinks about her grandson's silence now,
her eyes tear up and she whispers a familiar refrain
*There is no way I could have known,
he was just a baby, she cries.*

That night as she dozed in the recliner
she was startled awake by his kiss on her wrinkled cheek.
*I'm sorry grandma.
I won't cause you no more trouble.*

*But that boy lied,
she says, her voice breaking.
And every day she walks by the closed door
of a room that sits untouched,
the paper and plastic caps dropped by the paramedics still on the floor.
And every time she passes it, she feels herself go weak,
sees the hysterical woman she became when she saw
her grandson and the noose made with a dog leash.*

And now, in dreams frequently interrupted by trips to the bathroom,
it is always his swollen and discolored face that she sees.
And she never complains about her heart any more.

—Duffie Marshment

Professional Distance

Duffie Marshment

I cannot remember a time in my life that I didn't know Allan.
When we were both four, our fathers were stationed in Fort
Campbell, Kentucky. His mother would babysit my brother,
sister and me while my mother ran errands. We went to the same
church and our mothers were in the same Bible study. After Allan's
parents were divorced and he moved back to Ohio with his mother,
our families stayed in touch. And every few years, his family would
make a trip to Alabama to visit.

My first job out of nursing school was on a geriatric psych unit in
Columbus, Ohio. The patients mostly consisted of elderly adults with
newly onset dementia. In the elderly population, confusion can be
caused by anything from undiagnosed infection and medication side
effects to tertiary syphilis and Alzheimer's.

We also had the occasional schizophrenic patient. These patients
were often picked up by the police after demonstrating bizarre or dan-
gerous behavior. They were involuntary admissions and because of
them, the unit was locked.

But the patients that disturbed me the most were the depressed
ones. Many had lost something important: a spouse, a child, their
health, independence. Suddenly life lost its meaning. They had either
expressed the thought or made an effort to kill themselves. And there
was always an uncomfortable ring of familiarity to their situations.

You would feel the same way, my inner voice accused. Most of
these patients stayed long enough for the antidepressants to work and
then went back into the world with a prescription and an appointment.
Most we never heard from again, but that doesn't mean anything. In
the end, either we succeeded or they did.

Allan once told me that he remembered having suicidal thoughts
as early as the second grade. His class was out on the playground of
Beaver Elementary School in Beaver, Ohio. He said he remembered
looking at the brick side of the school and thinking that maybe if he
hit his head against it really hard, maybe it would be enough to kill
him. I didn't really know what to say. He hadn't been abused or
molested as a child. He went to church, had a closely-knit extended
family, and did well in sports. It seemed that he was no different from
thousands of other Midwestern boys, but something was very wrong.

After working in the psych unit for a while, I transferred to the emergency room of the same small hospital. Here, I encountered a whole other side of mental health. It was in the ER that I learned never to assume anything about a person's mental status until you have the results of a drug screen. Never diagnose any depression or psychosis until you know a blood alcohol level, or whether the person is on coke or acid. Mental illness, in the ER, was a symptom of drug abuse, a way to get out of jail, a way to manipulate loved ones, and a lot of paperwork regardless.

People who attempted suicide were treated like misbehaving children. The tube inserted up the nose and into the stomach was handled the same way as the double antibiotic injections given to people with STDs.

You have done this to yourself, I overheard one of the experienced nurses say as she put in the tube.

Allan's depression grew steadily worse as the years passed. In retrospect, I can see elements of bipolar disorder in his disease. His darkest days were followed by emotional highs so convincing that I would find myself swept away by the belief that the worst truly had passed and this time he was on the right combination of medicines. He would make plans, visit friends, and take trips. But inevitably, life would fail to be perfect and anything, a missed phone call, a cloudy day, a bad day at work, could send him back down. He hid his depression from almost everyone and the effort of maintaining outward appearances made things much worse. Every time, it would take him longer to get better. I think even then I knew.

When I moved back to Alabama, I got a job in the ER again. I liked the pace and the variety. I was working the night shift when a doctor walked up to the desk.

I need to talk to the ER doctor right away, he said leaning heavily against the desk. Dr. Andress listened to him and then sprang into action. Even now I am shocked by the speed with which he was intubated and put on a ventilator. Seconds later, his blood pressure bottomed out. I heard Dr. Andress on the phone.

He said he thought he wanted to die and took all the blood pressure medicine in his office. He got scared and drove himself here. I don't know if he's going to make it. He knew what he was doing. We admitted him to the ICU, but I doubt that he lived. After all, he knew what he was doing.

Allan is dead, my aunt said. Even though I had half-expected the

news for years, I still wasn't ready. *Allan? My Allan?* I asked, like it could be someone else. We drove to Ohio the next day. *I can't believe he is really gone*, I heard myself saying over and over.

He hanged himself. When he was found, he didn't have a pulse. Paramedics were able to get one back on the way to the hospital, but an EEG showed no brain activity. He was brain dead. Allan was gone.

I never told anyone at work where I had been. I hadn't been there long enough to have many close friends and I didn't feel like talking. I just clocked back in and went back to work. And I did all right until the night I took care of a patient who had committed suicide. He had been on the phone with his ex-wife when he pulled the trigger. He had a pulse initially and the paramedics brought him in, but there is nothing you can do for a person who is wearing half of his brain on his T-shirt.

When the room cleared out, I was left alone with the patient and so close to my own grief. I walked up beside him and felt nothing but cold rage.

How could you? I thought. I was furious with the selfishness, enraged by the waste. His dead eyes offered no answer.

Maybe I don't need to do this any more. I pulled up the sheet and left the room.

Time has passed and I still don't know if I need to be doing this. I have taken care of other suicide patients since and each one leaves indelible images in my brain. A piece of skull taped, so it wouldn't get lost, to the chest of a 60-year-old man who shot himself. The swollen and discolored face of a ten-year-old who hanged himself with a dog collar. And one woman who shot herself in the abdomen. After seven months in the hospital she had changed her mind about dying, but died anyway because there was a hole in her intestines that couldn't be repaired.

The patients that get to me the most now are the brain-dead ones. Usually, they are young men from car crashes. They have barely a scratch on them, but are dead all the same. And I find myself staring at these kids too long, wondering if that's how Allan looked before he died, before the swelling became pronounced. I watch the devastated family members try to comprehend such a staggering loss. And I perform my professional duties past the lump in my throat and the pressure in my chest. And when it is over, I wrap myself in a quilt made of Allan's old running shirts and try to ignore the sadness that never completely goes away.



Grandmother's Love
Amanda Myhan
Merit Award

For Falling Apples

I wish for every time someone said my name, I would receive three apples. One to eat, one to offer to the person who said my name, only to take it away at the last moment and to hold it over their heads (for they get no apples when someone says their name), and the other apple I would place in storage. People would get tired of having apples put in their faces and then taken away at the last moment, and eventually they would stop saying my name. They would simply call me something else like "it" or "you". But by that point, I would probably have, say, six thousand apples, enough to feed a small village. I would leave, take my name, and go feed that small village. And the whole village would learn my name and one would hear it murmured across the countryside all hours of the day, creating so many apples that they would just fall from the sky. Apple Rain. In church services, they would chant my name for hours. When they did not want apples to fall (if they were walking behind me or their bellies were about to burst), they would call me simply, Man-Whose-Name-Brings-Falling-Apples. And soon, the neighboring village would see that the village next to them had made it rich in the apple market and they would come to the village and beg me to teach them my name. Then for a price, I would say, sure, take my name, make apples. Then more villages, and more, one from across the Pacific saying, "We will make you our president. Come, be our apple tree." Wars would break out in my name, The War for Falling Apples. My name would become so powerful that wherever it was written, apples would fall. Everywhere a person stepped, apples. Then some boy would come along who dropped steaks at the calling of his name.

—Tyler Mason

Joseph slips a pair of keys and some cash into his pocket. He pulls a green sweater over his head and curses the closet door for sticking. He slips down the stairs to be stopped by a blood-corroded voice as he tries to sneak out the back door. The smell of bedpans and oily hair floods his nasal cavity with each cracking syllable.

"What are you doing in my house?"

Joseph turns slowly on one heel to see a shriveled raisin of a woman struggling to point a rifle in his direction.

"Hey, Grandma," he puts his hands up, "it's me."

"No, shit. What are you doing in my house?"

"I help you out during the week, remember?"

She scrutinizes him with a cataract-glazed eye and lowers the gun, "I don't remember agreeing to that."

Joseph scratches his head and pretends to be interested in her crystal animals on the side table.

"Well, all right. You're big enough to mow my lawn now, I reckon."

"Actually, I was about to go. It's Friday." He retains a breath, hoping his excuse will work.

"Fine. Go home. God knows I won't miss you. But first give me back my silverware."

"What?"

She hauls the rifle up and peers down the shaky barrel.

"Right."

As he pulls the spoon out of his back pocket he realizes that it has been peeking out for her to see the entire time. He sets the silver on her table with her crystal menagerie and backs out the screen door. He hears her muttering to herself as he shuts the door and sprints to his small motorbike in the driveway.

His tires squeal and throw gravel as he speeds out onto the highway. His clothes are peeled back by the country wind. Lingering exhaust from eighteen-wheelers makes him choke a little, but he remembers to keep his mouth shut.

Joseph leans against his bike and pulls a cigarette out of its carton. It's his first pack, and his fourth cigarette. He still hasn't learned to flick the ashes off expertly. He was reprimanded for simply letting

the first two burn between his fingers. *What a waste, man*, Billy would say, then snatch them to stick in his own mouth.

He hears a voice nearly muted by evening traffic. He looks across the highway from the gas station to see Billy running across the highway. Joseph's mouth falls open when Billy barely dodges a speeding car. The dry paper of the cigarette sticks to the inside of Joseph's lip.

When Billy arrives he pants and gasps, "Hey." He instinctively paws his pockets for a pack of cigarettes. When he realizes that they are not there, he looks up at the sky as if Jesus were the one who took his Marlboros. He taps his fists into his thighs and nods his head.

When he notices Joseph's amused expression he says, "Julie's making me quit."

"Ah, man, you're whipped."

"Shut up," he glances around suspiciously and snatches Joseph's cigarette, "thanks, man."

"Hey, that was mine!"

"I know. Why the hell are you starting now anyway?"

Joseph balances on his left leg and looks down at his scuffed leather boots. He shuffles his toe around in the gravel, "So, when have you decided it's gonna happen?"

"Monday. Ten-ish," Billy hesitates and nods as if he had to consult himself, first.

"Why that late?"

"Because it's dark, for one. And there aren't as many people out driving then. And check out all the license plates."

Joseph looks around the gas station, the fluorescent lights making the customers look like zombies. He squints to see some of the license plates.

"What about them?"

"They're mostly out of state."

Joseph pulls out another cigarette and stares blankly at Billy.

Billy sighs and leans forward with a lowered voice, "If you're driving through some shit town, and you're not from anywhere near it, are you going to stay there and talk to the police?"

"I guess you want me to say no?"

Billy smiles and points the stolen cigarette at him, "You don't have much of a choice, now, do you?"

Billy's wisdom is never questioned. As a general rule, Billy gets to be big brother to everybody. He's good at it, too. He is the man

for advice on all topics: alcohol, girls, and smoking in Joseph's case. They're still working together to teach him to roll a cigarette.

"So," he says, "when does your dad leave tomorrow?"

Joseph shrugs, "Around three."

"When does he get back?"

"I think he gets off at eight tomorrow."

"Dammit. He'll notice his shit missing before we even get to use it. Do you think he'll call the police on us?"

"Oh, I know he will," Joseph rolls his eyes and smoothes back a couple of brown cowlicks. Despite the man's phantom left arm, he could still beat the living daylights out of his offspring if he wanted to.

"Well, I guess that bumps mission impossible up a few hours to eight, then," he says.

"Do you think we should use face paint?"

Billy coughs on saliva from an unexpected fit of laughter, "Face paint? What the hell for?"

"To paint up the skin around our eyes and mouths. Or whatever shows through the mask. So they won't know our race."

"I don't think they'll have any problems guessing what we are, anyway. Blue eyes don't happen a lot in Mexicans or black people, and we both have them," he laughs a little and says, "but if you want, Rambo, you can wear face-paint."

Joseph flips him the bird and smiles.

"But it doesn't matter that they know we're white. It doesn't narrow the search down any. Like there's anything but us 'Aryan Perfection Krackers' for miles around, anyway."

Joseph laughs as Billy crosses his eyes and mockingly *Heil Hitler*'s. Billy can make anybody laugh. Especially if he's drunk. He gained a lot of respect from his peers when he killed a liter of whiskey in two hours and didn't vomit. He keeps the bottle on top of his television as a trophy. Billy's disciplinary policies for younger drinkers gained him a reputation for being the big brother type, which he gladly accepts. While he would punch you in the face for throwing up on the carpet, he would also give you milk to help your stomach. He taught Joseph how to gauge his alcohol levels to keep from becoming sick, so he doesn't question Billy's wisdom.

"I'm just trying to keep this thing clean," Joseph says.

"Yeah, well, you just worry about your dad's junk. I'll take care of the rest. We've gone over the plan plenty of times, so it'll go smoothly. You see over there?"

"Yeah, that where I park?"

"Yeah," Billy points to the east side of the gas station. "You stick around there and I'll go in. You just make sure nobody blocks us off."

"What if they do? We go behind it through that field on foot."

Billy points the cigarette at Joseph's face, "We don't leave the van, and we don't leave each other. And no ratting. They could trace the van to us if we got away without it."

Joseph's stomach burns with anticipation. He looks back down at his shoes and studies the frayed edges of his jeans.

"But I can trust you not to rat, right?" Billy smiles.

Joseph nods but says, "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Oh, no," Billy takes a couple of steps backward, "Don't even pretend you want to back out now. I've been working four-fifty-an-hour-washing-dishes-bullshit jobs here in Shitville for too long."

"No, I'm just saying, what if we screw it up."

"We can't screw it up! Since we could crawl we've been reaching for another state border, and now we've found a way. You are not going limp now are you?"

Joseph notices how Billy rocks back and forth on his heels and juts out his chin when he's agitated. His four-year-old half-brother does that. They are both very animated people, their emotions easy to read from the outside.

"No, I'm not going limp. I'm in."

He is less convinced by this statement, but Billy nods in approval. He flicks the cigarette into a patch of grass. He was always good at that part.

Joseph lies awake in bed. He pulls off his sweaty socks and kicks the covers off. The heating unit is working overtime, so sleeping has become a sticky chore. He sits up in his bed and looks over at his Bugs Bunny clock. *God, three in the morning, he thinks, I need sleep. Or liquor.*

He opens his door and sneaks down the stairs, ignoring the loud thumping noises coming from his dad and step-mother's room. He instinctively finds his way to the liquor cabinet in the dark and opens it. His fingers fumble over the glass bottles until he finds one that's short, with squared edges. Billy told him that the most killer poisons come in small vials, and the same goes with liquor. Joseph backs up to shut the door and hides the bottle underneath his T-shirt. He tiptoes up the stairs and nearly closes his bedroom door when a door opens from across the hall. He turns around to see his half-brother

for advice on all topics: alcohol, girls, and smoking in Joseph's case. They're still working together to teach him to roll a cigarette.

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He is less convinced by this statement, but Billy nods in approval. He flicks the cigarette into a patch of grass. He was always good at that part.

Joseph lies awake in bed. He pulls off his sweaty socks and kicks the covers off. The heating unit is working overtime, so sleeping has become a sticky chore. He sits up in his bed and looks over at his Bugs Bunny clock. *God, three in the morning, he thinks, I need sleep. Or liquor.*

He opens his door and sneaks down the stairs, ignoring the loud thumping noises coming from his dad and step-mother's room. He instinctively finds his way to the liquor cabinet in the dark and opens it. His fingers fumble over the glass bottles until he finds one that's short, with squared edges. Billy told him that the most killer poisons come in small vials, and the same goes with liquor. Joseph backs up to shut the door and hides the bottle underneath his T-shirt. He tiptoes up the stairs and nearly closes his bedroom door when a door opens from across the hall. He turns around to see his half-brother

standing in the doorway in his flannel pajamas, choking a stuffed dinosaur with one hand and rubbing a cranky eye with the other.

"I heard noises."

Joseph glances down the hall toward his parents' room, "Oh, yeah. It's all right. Go back to bed, Daniel."

He tries to shut the door again.

"I can't. It keeps waking me up. I want to know what it is."

"Um," Joseph suddenly remembers the alcohol underneath his shirt, "when a man and a woman like each other they play circus. In bed. In their sleep."

He holds his breath, hoping the child won't want to sleep in his bed.

Daniel glares at him cantankerously before shutting the door behind him and going to bed. Joseph sighs and relaxes his shoulders as he hears Daniel's bed squeaking under the child's weight. He shuts the door and sits on his bed. He unscrews the cap and lets the mystery liquor burn a tunnel down his throat.

Joseph ransacks his closet for black clothing. He finds a black long-sleeve shirt and jacket, but he has to borrow some black pants from Billy. He laces his black boots and debates duct-taping the soles. He saw a show on T.V. once where this killer was caught because of one distinctively patterned footprint that his tennis shoe left behind. However, Joseph reasons that he would only be running around on pavement, so he should be safe to leave them as is. His hands shake as he tries to tie the bow of his shoelaces. The uneasiness grows inside his belly. He isn't sure if he'll be able to hold it all in. But above all things that are crashing about in his mind, the rules of how to keep from throwing up are the most important to him right now.

1. Don't think about it too much.
2. Inhale longer than you exhale.
3. Tilt head back every time you feel like you're going to do it.

Joseph stands in front of his dad's room with his hand on the doorknob. He stands there for a few minutes. He takes in a deep breath and opens the door. As he walks to the bed and reaches under the mattress, he thinks about how dead he would be if his parents caught him at home instead of at school. He finds a pair of keys and takes them downstairs. He unlocks the office door and looks around at the gun cabinets. He puts a key into a one of the cabinet locks and stops, catching sight of his reflection in the glass panel. To himself he seems much older, the wrinkle in his brow almost becoming a

permanent feature of his face. The pale yellow of his skin makes the queasiness in his stomach a little more unbearable. He looks at his square jaw-line and the odd pointed chin that got paired up with it. He got the chin from his mother. He thinks of his mother as his eyes involuntarily focus on the rifle behind the glass. His thoughts slither away as he unlocks the door and takes out two rifles. He searches his father's desk and takes a lot of bullets.

Joseph knocks on Billy's apartment door, hugging the rifles wrapped in garbage sacks close to him. The November weather is cold, but he shivers to cover up his wobbling knees. Billy opens the door and ushers him in. He hands Joseph a pair of black pants and runs off into the kitchen. He comes back with two beers, the masks, and gloves.

He hands a beer to Joseph and says, "Tonight's the night."

They toast to each other and their wealthy futures.

Joseph stumbles along in the high grass, holding his hand close to his stomach. He drops to the ground and vomits. The blood that splattered on him smells. Billy had changed the plan and decided to drive the getaway van. Joseph had to go in alone and point the rifle, yelling out commands that rose from the bottom of his balls. The rush of power disappeared quickly when he heard shouts and the noise of an automobile's squealing tires. When the cashier's nose splattered against the wall of cigarette cartons behind her, Joseph grabbed the cash register drawer on the counter and ran outside. The van was peeling out of the gas station lot. Joseph drops the money and runs after it. Billy left him. Billy went limp.

After the van sped away he forgot all the rules of keeping the burning down. He lies in the grass next to his own vomit, holding his stomach and bawling like a five year-old girl. He feels the urge to throw up again. He doesn't bother trying to keep it in. He knows there isn't anyone around to give him milk.



Untitled
Melissa Griffin
Merit Award

Bumper Stickers

1.
My Child Is An Honor Student At Westminster Middle School
Well, I don't have any children, and if I did, they would be stupid and mean. Nothing like Suzy-smarty pants bringing home bumper stickers for her mom's Caravan. My kid would bring home F's and black eyes.

2.
D.A.R.E. to Keep Kids Off Drugs
Ritalin, apparently, is not a drug.
I wouldn't behave when I was ten, so Dr. Knowsalot gave my parents the prescription. A few years later, I kicked the habit.

3.
Jesus Saves
I can almost buy into that one. I would if my life weren't so shitty. Why won't Jesus save me from long hours, low pay and my boss? Well, I'll just have to save myself. Right.

4.
God Bless America
Not so long ago, this idea was obsolete.
Then again, fear and tragedy always lead me to find a cause and support it. I have to hunt down and massacre the great threat in the Middle East. Rally around the flag!
(The one I almost forgot existed!)

—Krystal Terry

Road Trippin'

Krystal Terry

It began innocently enough: two friends killing time on an average Sunday evening in Decatur, Alabama. Brandi and I were sitting at Sonic drinking chocolate milkshakes and complaining about the July heat. The sun shone down, blurring the horizon as I watched the cars drive by. Then, it caught my eye—a 1968 powder blue Volkswagen bus in mint condition. Without thinking, I stuck my head out of the car window and yelled “Nice bus!”

I settled back into my seat and sipped my milkshake. A few minutes later, the bus pulled into the parking space beside ours and the guy in the passenger seat leaned out the window in my general direction. Much to my dismay, he closely resembled a gopher, but the driver... the driver could have been Jim Morrison’s twin. I was instantly smitten. The gopher grinned stupidly at me as he spoke, “Hey. Ya’ll wanna go to the mall?”

“It’s Sunday. The mall closed an hour ago,” I said.

“Well, y’all wanna ride around?” he asked. I looked over at Brandi, and she shook her head adamantly no.

“Sure,” I said, grinning over at her as I got out of the car and climbed into the back of the bus, which was filled with multi-colored beanbags and the ripe smell of pot. I smiled, settling down onto one of the beanbags. Brandi climbed in behind me, scowling the entire time. The Gopher immediately joined us.

“I’m Krysi, and this is Brandi,” I said, lighting a Marlboro red.

“My name’s Shawn and that there’s Jackson,” he gestured to the driver as he spoke, “But don’t pay no attention to him. He’s trippin’ on ‘shrooms.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Brandi hissed.

“Nope, yon’t sum?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, taking a drag from my cigarette. I’d never done ‘shrooms before and neither had Brandi, but I wasn’t about to admit it in front of Jim Morrison, who *still* hadn’t spoken. Brandi wasn’t so brave. Before the Bus ever started to move, she opened the door and got out. I waved and tossed her my keys as we began to back up.

The Gopher reached into his pocket and pulled out a bag. I casually popped two of the caps in my mouth and began to chew. I grimaced; the mushrooms tasted how I imagined mummified flesh

would taste. I chewed them anyway and swallowed the chewed-up bits. We drove around for a little while and the mushrooms began to kick in. I climbed up into the passenger seat and sat down, feeling a little woozy.

“I think I’m gonna hurl,” I said.

“Here,” Jim finally spoke, handing me a bottle of water, “drink this and roll down the window, then just close your eyes and float. You’ll feel better in a minute.”

I took a few sips of water and took deep breaths. Each of my senses seemed ten times sharper as I looked at the fields passing in a blur.

“Hey, where are we going?” I looked over at Jim.

“To the beach, I want to see the sun rise over the ocean,” he said.

I don’t have any clear memories beyond that point, just fuzzy patches—headlights on the interstate, a gas station bathroom, smoking a couple of joints—none of it fits together or makes any sense.

The next morning, I awoke to someone knocking on the window of the bus. I was curled up, covered by an army coat, and my head was pounding, I sat up and looked around, peering out the open door at the back of Jim’s head.

“Wake up or you’re gonna miss it,” he said.

“Huh? Miss what? Where the hell am I?” I asked. As I climbed out the door I got a full view of my surroundings. It suddenly dawned on me: I was at the beach, and it was sunrise.

“Oh shit,” I looked over at him, “Where are we?”

“The beach,” he answered.

“Yeah, I noticed that much. Which beach?”

“Destin. Now, shut up and watch.” He pointed out over the water and I turned to see. It was breath-taking, the water was covered in a million diamonds and the sun shone like a pearl across the bare horizon.

“Sunset’s better,” he said, interrupting my daydream, “but we didn’t make it yesterday. Maybe we can hang around and see it tonight?”

“Yeah,” I said. And we did.



Artifact
Alan Burch
Campus Bookstore Award

Conception

Your grandmother said it was good for roses,
so I spent one hour burying two-weeks'-worth

of eggshells at the roots of my barren American
Beauty. One hour of work—bone and dark grit

all over me by sunset. That night shadows
danced across the walls and into the bedroom.

There were whispers and ruffled sheets
when you were formed. And in the end, bodies

laid curled together like rose roots resting
against the bone and dark seed of earth's womb.

—Holly R. Dotson

Stretch Marks

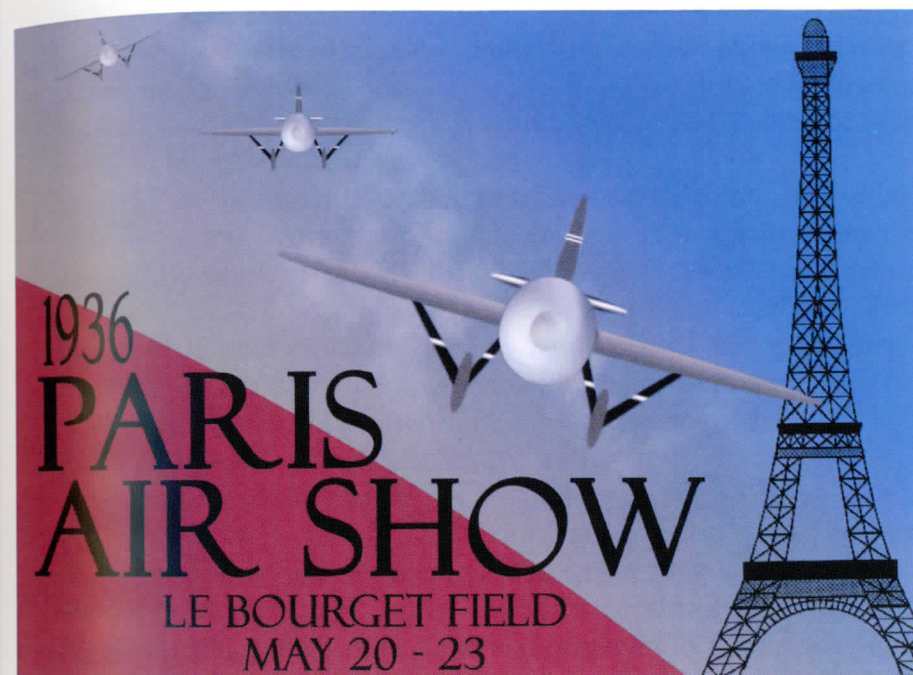
They looked like scars left by tiger claws.
Dry riverbeds drained of their life source.
But while taking a shower I watched

the water roll over the mountains
and through the valleys carved in my skin.
And if I find myself lost in the desert,

shipwrecked on a lonely island, or alone
on the island old age—my children gone,
lying in bed, I can trace the crooked paths

with my fingertips. Find my way back
to companionship. A permanent
connection to the lives that caused them.

—Holly R. Dotson



Untitled

Carl Brakin

1st Place 2D Color

The New Father Addresses His Son at Feeding Time

There will be lessons. Slow at first.
I must remind myself
to dole out only tiny bits
of wisdom, measured carefully
as the finely chopped chunks of ham
placed deliberately
on your tongue.

Might as well start with this:
things aren't always what they seem.
Consider these Cheese Puffs.
French-Canadians translate them
into something like "cheese shits,"
which makes sense when you think about it.
So be careful what you eat.

And watch what you say.
When you hear yourself in the future
hunting a poem for your own son,
you will find it almost impossible
to keep yourself out of its way.
Easier for everyone if you can.
Let your son arrange himself
into lines of his own choosing.
You can of course help him out
of unfortunate enjambments,
but mostly you should write like mad,
let every stubborn word find its own
surprising place,
and hope:
if your son is meant to be a villanelle
or a sonnet or even a ghazal
he will be a good one.

—David Haws

What It Takes

All I need are a few lines of poetry
so fierce that they buckle the knees
like one of Nolan Ryan's fastballs
or his vicious curve—so unpredictable that
even the most learned reader will duck
out of the batter's box.
To find just one or two lines, extraordinary
as those pitches, stunning enough
to make the average Joe remember them
over beers at the corner pub,
such a feat could make a poet's career.

Nolan Ryan once broke the arms
of two high-schoolers in a row by hitting them
with fastballs that got away from him.
For three decades Ryan's pitches got away.
All-Stars fidgeted like teenagers when they faced him.

But maybe what made Ryan great was not
that he threw inhumanly hard.
Maybe he plugged away like everybody else
until he learned his craft well enough to recognize
the importance of throwing on his off days and studying his own
form.

Or maybe he just wasn't afraid
to break a few arms with wild pitches
if that's what it took
to sneak the occasional hanging curve
across the plate for a strike.

—David Haws

Coming Clean

Duffie Marshment

“Frank, we need to talk.” Eva, his wife of two years stood in front of him, her arms crossed across a frame much smaller than it was when they met. He set down his briefcase and turned to hang up his coat and scarf.

“I am sick and tired of being ignored. All you do is work and you expect me to stay here alone all day while you’re gone and alone all night when you’re here. Do you have any idea how it makes me feel that you don’t even want to talk to me?” Frank looked at her only briefly and turned to walk upstairs. She followed him to their bedroom. He took out his worn suitcase and opened it on the bed. He packed efficiently and quickly.

“I am not a piece of furniture, Frank. I wanna go out. I wanna see movies and go to parties. I want friends and a life. I can’t live like this any more.” She continued, but he’d stopped listening. He wondered if they would be arguing if Eva hadn’t lost so much weight in the last year. He closed his suitcase and headed for the door.

“Don’t you dare turn your back on me, I’m talking to you.” Her voice rose at the end, carried higher with the flight of reason. At the front door he paused, his hand on the knob. He turned back to her. Eva stood at the top of the stairs. She was livid, her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkled, and each breath thrust her breasts against the worn fabric of her knit sweater. She was lovely.

“Frank, if you leave now, I won’t be here when you get back,” she said quietly.

This was a new Eva. He didn’t know what to make of her, but a lifetime of running was pulling him out the door.

“I’ll be back later, when you’ve had a chance to calm down,” he finally said. He put on his hat and nodded. A roaring noise came from deep within her throat and she hurled an antique vase at his head. It barely missed him, shattering on the doorframe. He really ran then and had just closed the door when something else heavy and breakable crashed against the solid wood.

When he came home two days later, he fully expected Eva to meet him at the door. When she wasn’t there, he thought she hadn’t heard him come in. He started calling.

“Eva, honey? It’s OK. I’m not mad.” He started up the stairs. When he reached the end of the hall, he stared in amazement at the disarray in the bedroom. His clothes were everywhere, torn from the

hangers and strewn about the room. Just as noticeable, was the absence of everything of Eva’s from the bedroom. His eyes fell on an envelope on the nightstand. His name was carefully lettered on the outside. Frank just shook his head at the irrationality of it all and started hanging clothes back into the closet, sorting them according to color and season. He never read the letter.

In fact, he barely noticed her absence. Days followed each other in an orderly progression that was free of emotion. He settled back into the life he’d had before he married Eva. Occasionally, he would catch a glimpse of the letter on the nightstand as he was reaching to turn off the light. And at times, he would entertain himself by imagining the contents. But he never opened it.

Frank didn’t consider his life to be incomplete in any way until the plant closed and he was forced into retirement. Fortunately, he had been one of the few who had worked there long enough to retire. Most of his coworkers found their futures in question. And after the news of the closing got out, many people stopped working altogether, choosing instead to gather in the break room and commiserate about the future. When Frank realized the inevitable emotional scenes to come, he started clearing out his desk a little at a time. He stopped going to work the week before the closing. Frank just faded away. He considered finding a new engineering job, rejecting the idea quickly. He was too old to start over.

Almost overnight, Frank found himself with a lot of time and few interests. Sure, he still enjoyed constructing tiny airplane and car models, as he had since childhood. But he was older now and his back would ache after only six or seven hours of bending over the tiny pieces. After a few weeks of retirement, Frank found himself wandering aimlessly around his house, strangely dissatisfied with his life.

On Monday, while watching the morning news, Frank realized that he could die and no one would know. Why, he could pass away in his bed and no one would ever notice his disappearance. He pictured the news story of his death. The pretty reporter stood on his front lawn, overgrown now after months of neglect, and spoke directly into the camera:

“The coroner believes that Mr. Singleton expired sometime last fall. The severe winter weather and Mr. Singleton’s solitary existence contributed to the long delay between his death and the discovery of his body. Why, if neighborhood kids hadn’t broken in a back window with a baseball, the death could have gone undiscovered for years. This is certainly a very sad

situation and with no next of kin, Mr. Singleton will most likely be buried in a pauper's grave. Back to you, Charles."

Frank shuddered at the indignity of such a report, wondering only briefly if they still buried people in pauper's graves. No matter. He grabbed his hat and left his house.

Four hours later, Frank found himself in a booth at Jay's Diner downtown. His out-of-date clothing had drawn a few stares at the mall and he had felt completely out of his element, but the crowd in Jay's was mostly older men and he felt himself relax. The middle-aged waitress took his order with a minimum of conversation. He liked that about her and made it a point to look at her face when she came back with his coffee. But when he noticed the tattoo peeking out of her sleeve and the glint of a tongue ring when she smiled, he dismissed her as a candidate. Carefully, he pulled a single napkin out of the chrome dispenser and started his list: Places To Meet Women.

Two weeks later, Frank had been to the library, the movie theatre, the farmer's market, and a number of small women's clothing stores, not feeling brave enough to face the new mall again. But in all of them, he'd encountered problems. In the library and the theatre, talking was frowned upon. All he could do was watch the women and hope that an opportunity would present itself. It didn't. The farmer's market had few single women. And a lone man lingering in a women's clothing store, silently watching the clientele, was more creepy than effective, a fact driven home when the police were called to escort him out of Daria's Dress Shop.

Late that night, he sat up thinking. Horrified at his experience, he again pictured the reporter on his front lawn. Only this time her report started out: "A suspected pervert was found dead in his home this morning..." The middle of the report was unchanged, but the ending was worse. "A pauper's grave is more than he deserves and the world is a safer place with his passing. Back to you Charles." He mixed himself a whiskey sour and sipped it slowly, thinking.

He grabbed the phone book and flipped through the yellow pages slowly, searching for a perfect place to meet his mate. When he got to the L's, he paused. Laundromats. He thought about it, picturing the machines and the women who would come in to wash their clothes. He would wash clothes too, so he would have a reason to be there. There were no restrictions on talking. This could be a perfect opportunity. Excitedly, he scrolled the listings: Jiffy Coin, Super Kleen, Wash-N-Go, Clean Scene, Kleenco, and Park Valley Laundromat. He carefully copied the names into his pocket notebook. After looking

over his list, he eliminated the ones that were misspelled, feeling that only the uninformed would find that cute. Jiffy Coin sounded lower class and was quickly marked off the list. Park Valley Laundromat was near a housing project so he marked through it as well, leaving only Clean Scene and Wash-N-Go. He planned to go to one of them on Saturday. Smiling, he killed his drink, setting the empty glass next to the yellowed envelope on the nightstand. He turned out the light and went to bed.

On Saturday morning, the electronic chime sounded as Frank Singleton entered the dimly lit world of the Wash-N-Go Laundromat at the corner of Fifth and Third. He scanned the crowd looking for the perfect machine. There were some college kids and few single men, but most of the patrons were women. Excellent. He noticed a petite brunette in the back, no basket on the machine next to hers. She was the one.

"Maybe today won't be a complete wash," he said to himself, chuckling at his own wit. Really he was too good for this, he thought. But here he was among all of these people who couldn't even afford their own washers and dryers.

His nose wrinkled in distaste as two children brushed past him.

"This is no place for children. What kind of parents," he mumbled to himself.

"Oh yeah, how many kids you got?" The voice came from behind a machine in front of him. An enormous woman wearing only a nightgown raised up from emptying her dryer. As she did, her huge breasts and the fat rings on her belly strained against the thin satin of her pink gown. The darkness of her skin contrasted with the pink of her gown and the curlers in her hair. Mortified by both her appearance and his slipup, Frank blushed a deep shade of crimson. He turned and started to make his way to the back.

"That's what I thought," she said to his back and laughed at him. Frank ignored the deep chuckle and tried not to think about how her laugh would make all of her offensive parts jiggle.

Just then the door chime sounded again and Frank was nearly knocked over by a teenage boy with a huge sack of laundry.

"Sorry Pops," the kid said as he passed, then proceeded to the back and tossed his bag onto the very machine Frank was headed for. Frank froze. What should he do now? Maybe this was a bad idea. He thought about just leaving; he had a washer and dryer at home. But then he saw the brunette kiss the boy on the cheek and toss him a set of car keys. The boy was gone as quickly as he had come and Frank started looking for a different machine.

He found a machine two rows up and put his clothes in, pouring his premeasured baggie of Tide over them. While lining up his quarters in the slot, he started planning his attack. The brunette was sitting in the back, alone, flipping through an old copy of *Woman's Day*. She appeared to be in her forties and had no wedding ring. If he were a younger man, he might have rejected her for her long-sleeved purple silk shirt with faded jeans and cowboy boots. He might have criticized her for her hair being too long or her huge gold hoop earrings being gaudy, but he could change all of those things later. Now it was time for him to make his move. He felt his palms get sweaty and his mouth dry up as he approached her.

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?" he asked, pointing to an empty seat two down from hers. She glanced up at him briefly, then went back to her old magazine.

"Don't guess so," she said.

He smiled as he sat, considering the great progress he had made with this woman. He pulled out his pocket notebook and flipped to his list of "Desirable Characteristics."

He placed a small check next to quiet and placed a question mark next to sense of style. He acknowledged that he was not a fashionable person and it hadn't worked out with Eva, but he was retired now and could spend some time on the right woman. He looked at her again, thinking about how they would someday tell people how they met. He would look at her in her subdued clothing and stylish haircut and make a joke about all of the quarters he spent on this love. "My clothes have never been cleaner and I have never been happier," he would say. Everyone would laugh, they would kiss, and people would be envious of them.

Encouraged by his daydream, Frank tried to think of what he should say next.

"Busy today," he said.

"Pardon?"

"I said it is busy in here today." Frank started a new list in his pocket notebook. Item number one was listening skills.

"Well it is Saturday," she said, dismissively. Silence once again descended. She turned a page, then another. Frank grew anxious.

"I'm Frank," he said suddenly extending his hand. She eyed him warily. His heart beat faster.

"I'm Kay." She shook his hand. Her hand was cold though and her grip was loose. Frank didn't like that. He withdrew and unconsciously wiped his hand on his pants. Flipping open his notepad, he

added another flaw to the list.

Again silence. Kay got up to check her machines. When she returned, she placed a basket of laundry onto the seat between them. He watched as she began folding her the clothes into another basket at her feet. No men's clothing, he noted, satisfied. Feeling slightly braver, he forged on.

"Was that your son in here earlier?" he asked.

"Yeah, he looks a little rough, but he has a good heart. My second husband, his father, was a real piece of work. One time he..." she continued to talk, but he didn't hear any of it.

He hadn't considered the possibility of an ex, much less nine or ten of them.

"Just exactly how many times have you been married?" He interrupted her and Kay stopped mid-sentence.

"I don't think that is any of your damn business," she said and returned to her folding. He watched her for a moment, thinking, only vaguely aware of the door chime sounding in the background.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by that," he said after another moment.

"Whatever," she said returning to her magazine.

He looked at her, contemplating the severity of his blunder. His thoughts were interrupted by a loud voice and a huge shadow that eclipsed the hanging light bulbs in the room.

"Kayla, get over here and bring that cart with you. My back's hurting." A huge basket of laundry dropped into the seat on the other side of him, shaking the entire row of seats.

Frank looked up and found himself staring at the most unusual creature he had ever seen. She was enormous. Her trunk was round and resting on long bird-like legs, disproportionate to the width of her abdomen. She had to be at least six and a half feet tall. Nothing about her was attractive or stylish or even notably clean. Her mousy brown hair was cut short and fell limply across her forehead. The green pantsuit she wore barely stretched over her enormous abdomen and the pants were at least four inches too short. Something wet was spilled down the front of the shirt.

She ran her fingers through her hair and noticed Frank looking at her. She contemplated him in return, running her tongue over her crooked, stained teeth, sizing him up. He felt like a bug under a magnifying glass. Finally, she extended her right hand.

"Name is Delores, friends call me Dee. How ya doing?"

"Fine, thanks." She grabbed his hand and shook it enthusiastically. His hand remained limp in her grasp. He realized he was still staring

at her, open-mouthed. He snapped his jaw shut and pulled away. Unconsciously, he wiped his hand on his pants.

"If I knew your name, I could say it was nice to meet you, but I guess I..."

"Frank. My name is Frank." She reached over him and grabbed his right arm and pumped it again.

"Great to meet you, Frank. Not much of a talker, are ya? Well that's okay. I've been told I talk enough for three people, so that's no biggie. Kayla, get over here." A dark-haired girl with glasses came toward them, pushing a laundry cart with a broken front wheel. She appeared to be about ten years old and when she got closer, Frank could see she had a lazy eye and her denim overalls were dirty.

"Now what am I going to do with a broken cart? Go back over there and get one that ain't broke. Come on, Kayla." The girl turned around and headed back across the room. Delores started sorting her laundry into piles right on the floor of the Laundromat. He watched her pick up each item and toss it into the appropriate stack. She picked up the largest pair of red panties that he had ever seen and paused, looking at him again.

"So Frank, I've been here every Saturday for a year and I ain't never seen you here before. You new in town?" Delores looked at him closely, her green eyes narrowing.

Frank nodded, blushing with the lie, but wanting the conversation to end. She tossed the panties onto the dark pile and went back to sorting. He turned to Kay, scrambling for something to say. She read her magazine, oblivious.

"Are you done with this?" Frank pointed to a magazine on the seat between them. Kay didn't even respond. He picked up the magazine, trying to think of what to say next.

"*Soap Opera Weekly*, huh?" Delores looked him up and down, "Woulda never pegged you for a fan of the soaps. So what's your poison?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know, which is your favorite?" She leaned in closer and lowered her voice. "Not much to choose from any more if you ask me." Leaning back she winked at him. When she saw the blush creep over his face, she laughed, a loud belly-shaking chuckle. Frank felt his skin grow hot. What was he doing here? Delores stopped laughing abruptly.

"Hey," she leaned in close again, "you aren't one of those homosexuals are ya?"

"What? Of course not. No." He stood up, horrified. Coming here had been a horrible mistake. He grabbed his basket and walked

quickly to his machine, throwing open the lid. Damn, the clothes were sitting in the sudsy water. He would at least have to wait for the spin cycle to finish or his car would be soaked. Maybe he would just leave them. He did a mental inventory of the contents of the washer. The sweater his mother gave him the Christmas before she died was in there. He couldn't leave. He was standing there trying to decide what to do, when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, Frank, I didn't mean to upset you. It's just a girl can't be too careful these days and well, I've been burned before. And you have to admit you're a little neat."

"Neat?" He reached into the sopping clothes, wondering if he could wring them out himself, desperate to leave.

"Yeah, all of your clothes have been pressed. Most people don't dress that well on workdays, much less laundry day when everyone else is almost out of clean clothes." He looked down at his clothes. She was right. He would have to wear different clothes next time, when he went somewhere else.

"I'd like to make it up to you if I could. Maybe we could go next door and have a cup of coffee while our clothes are drying." Frank froze in place.

"Hello? Is that a yes?" She wasn't going to go away, he realized. Frank took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Delores, you seem like a nice woman, but I'm not... I mean you're not," he turned to face her and found himself at eye level with her breasts.

"You're not what?" she asked. He forced himself to look up into her face, noticing for the first time the faint green eyeshadow and a touch of blush on her cheeks.

"To be honest, I'm not sure what I'm doing here any more, Delores." His voice softened with regret. He shook his head and closed the lid of the machine.

"I know what you mean," she said, looking down at him. "It's so hard to meet nice people these days."

And for the first time, Frank looked at her, really looked at her.



Pen Pal
Amanda Myhan
2nd Place 2D Color



Haddocks
Amanda Myhan
Merit Award

He Wrestled Alligators

Beth E. Mangham

My uncle owned an alligator. Well, actually he is my great-uncle and no one can ever really own an alligator. He called it George. He lived in a small Louisiana town called Leesville on about 150 acres of land. He had a pond that covered about two of those acres. I guess you would call it a lake—but where do ponds stop and lakes begin? At any rate, we always called it a pond.

Uncle Buford was clearing the overgrowth from around the pond one day and discovered George near the bank. He was only a baby and Uncle Buford had never seen any other alligator around. He came back each day for many weeks to check on George and even brought him food. George grew quickly and somehow learned to trust Uncle Buford.

I remember hiding in some nearby bushes and watching Uncle Buford feed George. I was amazed at how his powerful jaws came so close to my uncle's arm and how he threw the meat around like he was trying to re-kill it.

* * * *

Uncle Buford told me a story once about George. He said he was driving home one evening and saw an alligator in the middle of the road.

He got out of his beat up truck and said, "George! How in God's name did you make it out here?"

He walked over to George and grabbed him. He put one hand around his stomach and held his mouth with his other hand. George thrashed around so much Uncle Buford almost dropped him many times.

He yelled, "George, you stupid bastard, stop thrashing around."

Then he took him and threw him in the back of the truck. He took him back to the pond and let him out.

"I look, and now I have two Georges," he told me to conclude his story and laughed his loud, round laugh.

The second alligator left fairly quickly. I never knew for sure if the story was true, but it could have been. Uncle Buford was just that way.

* * * *

We came to Louisiana each year for our family reunions. Uncle Buford always offered his land for the reunions. My brothers, some cousins and I would be allowed to sleep on the screened back porch.

During the day we would swim in the pond. It was the same pond George swam in, but I never remember seeing him, or even something that looked like a log floating nearby. Uncle Buford said he lived on the other side of the pond, so we weren't worried. The branches of the trees hung over the pond. They covered just enough to make the

water cold throughout the day, but not enough to keep us from getting sunburned as we swam out into the center of the pond. My uncle had fashioned a rope swing onto a tree near the bank. He tied the thick rope to a sturdy branch—a topic of discussion for years was how exactly Uncle Buford got that high in the tree—and tied knots in the end closest to the ground. We would put our feet on one knot and our hands above the next knot and swing out about twenty feet before dropping down into the icy water. We swam all day long every day we were there. We would get so sunburned that in the evening, Aunt Doris would tear a leaf from her Aloe plant and smear the liquid all over us.

When I was a young girl, Uncle Buford swam with us. He would scream like a scared child. I've rarely heard a man scream like that. It was loud and long and almost frightening. Some of the kids made fun of him so he said it helped to warm him before he hit the cold water but I think he was just scared.

* * * *

I went back to our reunion this year after many years of being away. Uncle Buford was there. I thought he would always be there. Somehow Uncle Buford seems immortal, but he didn't swim with us this year. He is old now. His white hair gleams in the sun and he walks by leaning heavily on a cane. I sat beside him while we ate our crawfish and we talked. I asked whatever happened to George.

"He went off. I can't get down to the pond that much any more and I guess he wanted to see the world," he told me. He laughed his loud laugh, but I saw a small amount of sadness in his eyes. He wanted to see the world too, I think.

"Uncle Buford, why don't you fly out to Alabama and visit us?"

He laughed again, this time it is genuine, "No honey, I can't leave this land."

I didn't understand that answer, but I let it go. I slept on the screened porch again. I left early the next morning. Uncle Buford was already up and stood outside with his cup of coffee.

"Goodbye sweetie," he said.

"I'll be back next year, Uncle Buford," I tell him.

"We'll see you then."

Uncle Buford was never much for long goodbyes. So I gave him a hug and left.



Oakland Creek
Justin Michael
Merit Award

Words

Celinia Stewart

The mudpies were lined up as precisely as Marines along the edge of the porch. The bricks beneath the thin paper plates baked them as effectively as an oven. The sun winked at my work, eager to brown the tops of the pies. I tweaked the position of several twigs and pine needles, twisting them into replicas of brown licorice. The rocks, chosen carefully from the driveway, dotted the pies as decoratively as marzipan flowers. Mother's roses were off-limits even though their salmon color would have set off the muddy tint beautifully. My head bowed over a bed of buttercups, diligent in picking only the most perfect buttery petals. They would have to do.

Something hit me and caught in my hair. I reached up and pulled a thick piece of bark from my mousy hair. Mother called it dishwater blonde, which depressed me terribly. I looked behind me and saw my two brothers ducking behind the Buick.

"I saw you," I yelled, my voice squeaking. "You better quit it." They emerged from their hiding place, laughing.

"Yeah, what are you going to do? Throw a mudpie at us?"

Brandon's voice was laced with contempt. As the only girl in the family, I received the designation of "sissy." Yet, they conveniently forgot this when they made me hold their hands at night after watching a scary movie.

Adam walked to the porch, eyeing my pies. After spitting on the one I had spent the most time on, he dumped himself in the chair by the front door. Brandon followed, declaring ownership of the chair because he was older and pushed Adam out of it. They sat there watching me for a few moments. Even with my back to them, I could hear the wheels turning in their torturous little heads.

I threw the handful of petals down, tired of being a girl. They never wanted me around. It seemed that all I did was watch them run away into their little boy world, while I stayed behind with Mother, behind the screen door as they escaped down the road on their bikes. I knew that I wasn't interested in most of the icky stuff they did, but I would have loved to have been invited along. I knew the only time I would be invited into their world was when they became bored with their BB guns and touch football.

I joined them on the porch, and we discussed building a fort at

Grandmother's the next day. There were three rows of pine trees in the lower part of the yard. The amount of pinecones made fort-building a necessity. We argued over who should guard the fort while the other two built it. Of course, they wanted to stick me with this duty, even though they would not let me carry the BB gun. Finally, I said that I would build my own fort. They laughed, loudly.

My desire to be a part of their boyiness got the best of me, and I said that word that I had been taught was most unladylike.

"I've got to pee."

The words were so innocent and so true. I was on the verge of having to cross my legs. But I had said it, and the screen door could not block the word from reaching Mother's ears.

The door swung open.

Brandon and Adam huddled down, choking with laughter. I looked up into Mother's red face and tried to widen my eyes in an innocent plea.

"I heard that." Her voice boomed under the shade of the porch. I felt a pinch on my ear, and my feet dragged as she pulled me into the house.

The bathroom door stood open. The brown and white linoleum floor was drowned in sunlight. I could smell the soap before she had unwrapped it. Ivory smells as strong as any floor cleaner, and my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, dreading the taste of cleanliness.

Mother had always been a strong believer in washing mouths out. Perhaps, it is because hers had been cleaned often enough when she was little. Always with Ivory soap; it is a family tradition.

After choking in the suds and my tears, I vowed to never say another dirty word as long as I lived. Mother picked me up and rubbed my back for several minutes. The soapy smell of my lips almost turned my stomach, but I quickly calmed down.

I marched back out on the porch and stared my brothers down. No matter what they thought of sissy girls, I was no longer one.

I hated walking through the mall with my brothers. They squeezed me between them just as they did when we rode in the car. The middle seemed to be my assigned place. Usually, I just fell behind and walked alone past the stores, certain that everyone was staring at my chubby, nine-year-old body. Eventually, we would veer off into a store like a flock of geese, led by Mother. Brandon and Adam rolled their eyes and shuffled their feet among the racks. Daddy held Mother's hand and looked where she looked. I simply hid

behind anything I could find.

Inevitably, we worked our way to the opposite end of the mall, my favorite area. I never had to say a word. Mother simply glanced at me and nodded her head. I scurried through the archway of the bookstore and ran my hands along the covers of the books laid out on the discount tables. Usually, I headed straight for the Young Adults section, but occasionally I wandered, leafing through books much too advanced for me, staring at covers that seemed otherworldly, and whispering the titles to myself.

This particular night, I found myself in the Classics section. My eyes moved along the shelves, discarding boring or difficult titles. Some simply fascinated me, making me wonder what an odyssey was or why Jude was obscure. One book was turned so that the cover faced me. There was a black bird, standing on a dirt path with an open book in its wings. *The Raven and Other Works by Edgar Allen Poe*. Not only did the illustration captivate me but so did the author's name. It seemed romantic, especially Poe.

I picked up the book and fingered through it. The first story was "The Tell-Tale Heart." I scanned the page, stopped and read it again, slowly. Amazed, I sat on the floor and read the entire story.

When Mother and Daddy came by to get me, I begged for the book, and they bought it. It may have been a little advance for a nine-year-old, but they were happy that at least one of their children enjoyed reading. If they ever refused to buy me a book, I don't remember it.

That copy of Poe is ragged now and pretty well memorized.

Every once in a while, Mrs. Standridge spent our class in the girl's restroom, throwing up. We all knew that she was bulimic and a little crazy. Her skin draped over the bones of her face like a shroud; her eyes, dull and fervent, refused to blink. The paleness of her scalp peeked through her thinning, teased hair. We decided that Mrs. Standridge made a generous contribution every day to the depletion of the ozone layer. One girl had seen her walk through Wal-Mart with an armload of Aquanet.

Most days she sat in front of the class and chatted with us about the Homecoming Court or *Days of Our Lives*. Jennifer, a girl whose hair looked like it should be doused with water, had her mother tape the show every day so she could watch it at night. The first ten minutes of our fifty-five minute class was spent with her sharing the

details of the latest scandal on the show. All I remember of the many plots and subplots that she shared was the time when a demon possessed Marlena. Even the boys were interested in that storyline.

Our class was ninth grade English. Mrs. Standridge usually taught *The Scarlet Letter* to juniors, having them build dioramas featuring a red "A" that she displayed throughout her classroom. Seventeen-year-olds painted cardboard backgrounds primary colors: blue sky, yellow sun, black mountains. Jagged paper cutouts were pasted on dried twigs and glued to a green cardboard ground. In most of them, Hester's small cottage popped up in the foreground, an ingenious use of toothpicks. I memorized the different versions of the "A," pasted on each diorama. Some were ornamental enough to draw Pearl's attention from her mother's own letter. The deep red scrolled along the paper, accented by intricate curls of gold. Others were basic, surely the boys'; a simple block letter that tottered between scarlet and orange pasted to the crooked sky over that desolate, streaky ground. The letter, lurid and beautiful, stuck in my mind, and I read my oldest brother's marked-up book in a weekend. Hawthorne's actual words made me ashamed of those primitive dioramas. They mocked Hester's dignity and poor Pearl's isolation. One day in class, I noticed that Mrs. Standridge's wrist stuck out of the sleeves of her blouse as inelegantly as the twigs breaking off of their cardboard roots.

We learned nothing in her class, which at the time suited us fine. However, I cannot forget that Mrs. Standridge is the reason that I am writing at all today. One of the few times that she actually assigned us anything, we were told to imagine ourselves as trashcans and write a short story about our day. We laughed at such an absurd thought and set to work. I wrote until the bell rang and wished that I had time to write more. I turned the story in with a sheepish smile.

Two days later, Mrs. Standridge held up a sheaf of papers and began reading the top one. My face flooded with a blush, and I stared at my desktop until I heard laughter. The class laughed at the silly anger my trashcan felt when the trash collector handled it disrespectfully, or when a group of snotty-nosed boys stood across the street and used it for target practice with their BB guns. They liked it and so did Mrs. Standridge. I tried to hide my smile, but it was impossible.



Small Plate
Beth Bachuss
Merit Award

WHEN SHE HAD WITH HER SHIRT, SHE WAS FINISHING THINGS UP AT MY AUNT JEAN'S, WITH HER FOR THE RECEPTION. MOTHER'S OLDEST SON, HE HAD SAID "MAMIE, IT'S MOTHER!" SHE HAD HAD ME TO SAY WHAT SHE WANTS? MOTHER KNEW THE PHONE. MOTHER HAD A SMALL SMILE ON HER FACE, FEELING BETTER TODAY? SHE ASKED, OF COURSE, NOBODY HAD HEARD, TELL SHE THAT YOU MET TO Y SHE HAD SAID, "I'LL SEE YOU LATER!" SHE SET THE PHONE. HE WAS PLACING IN HIS SHOP BUT RAN AWAY. NO ONE BOOTHERED TO CALL GRANDMA AND MOTHER HAD TO TAKE HER, JUST THAT SHE WAS IN HER FAVORITE GRANDDAUGHTER'S SPANISH DRESS (HER BEARY) COME FROM A LINE OF HOLY DANCE BY OUTLINE THOSE HUGGERS, BUT OF RESPECT, FIRST ONE, THE LAST ONE, THE ONE I KNEW AND I GARLAND THOMAS WAS A GOOD MAN, BUT HE LOVED TO SCREAM AT GARLAND ALMOST EVERY ONE OF US TO START SOMETHING LIKE THIS: "GARLAND, THIS IS OFF BEFORE DAYLIGHT, I TELL YOU I HAVE HAD IT FOR IS EATING AND NICKING UP THE PLACE, ONE AND SHOOT EVERY BLASTED ONE OF THEM! ONLY FAULTS AND THE ACTIONS SHE WAS WILLING TO A WIFE BACK TO GRANDMA, HE WOULD JUST TALK A TUFFL STRUT AND WE WOULD KNOW IT WAS AN

THINGS. AS ALWAYS, HE HEADED STRAIGHT TO THE THREE KIDS. HE USUALLY WALKED HARD AND FAST. HE WAS ASHAMED, BUT ONLY BECAUSE WHEN HE HAD THE SEVENTEEN MILES TO TOWN, GARLAND WHERE HE HAD HIS LIFT, HE AND GRANDMA HAD BEEN MARRIED, BUT HE NEVER IN WHEN HILLARD WENT TO LET HIM IN. SHE INFORMED HIM THAT SHE WOULD NOT ANY TIME AND SHE REQUESTED ANY ONE OF THEM COULD CANCEL. IT DID NOT MATTER WHAT HAPPENED TO HER. MOTHER VADRA CALLED AND TRIED TO TALK TO HER, BUT I DID NOT GO. I COULD PICTURE GRANDMA STANDING IN HER PATENT LEATHER PUMPS HANGING INSIDE THE LIPSTICK AND, THIN LIPS MOVING FURIOUSLY OVER THE PHONE. I CALLED GRANDMA LATER AFTER EVERYONE CALLED. SHE COULD POK HER UP ON THE WAY. SHE INFORMED HOW SHE HAD NOT COME TO MY BRIDAL SHOP. GARLAND LEFT. SHE DID NOT LIKE BEING ALONE AT THE MOTHER. THE BEST OF THE FAMILY, NO ONE EVER, I HAD ALL OF SOMEONE'S ATTENTION AT THE MOTHER. BOTH KNEW AND THE MANY I DID NOT. ON SUNDAY, THE WOODEN FLOORS ON HER FRONT PORCH WHICH WAS FLAT. WHILE WE ATE POPCORN AND DRANK POPS. GARLAND HAD A RELATIVES LAUNDRY. SHE WOULD TALK TO THE THINGS SHE HAD TO SAY TO HIM. I MAY NOT LET ANY. WHO EVER HEARD OF A CROWN, GOD-FEARING, AN ATAN WORSHIPERS? WHAT COULD HE BE THINKING? A STICK AND A CASE HUNTING FOR LIVE RATTLESNAKES. I WILL NEVER. SHE WAS REFERRING TO THE BORN IN WORSHIPERS. THEY USED RATTLESNAKES IN SOME CHURCHES. A SIGN OF FAITH. GRANDMA DID NOT GO TO CHURCH OF CHRIST. SHE CHANGED PLUG TO A FREATIC CANON. AT THE AGE OF SEVENTY-FOUR, SHE HAD TOO MUCH FOR HER. EITHER MY OLDEST BROTHER OR SHE BELIEVED THAT BECAUSE MY MOTHER WAS THE ONLY ONE KNEW SHE HAD THAT MAN AS LONG AS I WAS FIVE CHILDREN, MOST OF THE TIME WITH US. BUT TOGETHER IT SEEMS GRANDMA DID NOT HAVE A GOOD IN THE LIFE SHE HAD CHOICE AND SHE TOOK IT OUT OF HIS HAND WHEN THEY WERE CROWING UP, BUT THEY WERE OF HIS LEAVING. HER NAME WAS GORA ELVIRA WALKER. BY EVENT, EVEN WITHOUT ONE GRANDMA, BUT I FELT MORE NOW, TWENTY YEARS LATER, WHEN I FELT BY TEN MADE OF THE ONE WITH GRANDMA WALKER. I GAVE IT TO HER ONE CHRISTMAS. I HAVE NEVER GIVEN TO SEE HER IN THE NURSING HOME ON THE EAST. SHE SPOKE TO ME AS I ENTERED HER ROOM WERE "WHERE'S MONTHS, AND 'JUNIOR' NEVER WENT TO SEE HER." SHE WENT THROUGH HER THINGS AND DIVIDED THEM AWAY AWAY ANYTHING. I WAS GIVEN LETTERS I HAD MADE

VAHRA WAS ALSO THERE. WHEN JEAN CALLED MOTHER WAS HOLDING HER HAND OVER THE NIGHTPHONE AS SHE JUST SHOOK HER HEAD, WALKED OVER TO JEAN, AND FAGE AS SHE LIFTED THE RECEIVER TO HER EAR. "HILLARD, YOU KNOW TO ASK MOTHER JUST SAID 'MAMIE' AN HOUR APPOINTMENT. MOTHER, NOW IVE GOT TO GET BAG NEVER SHOW. JEAN IMMEDIATELY SAID MAURICE COULD TELL HER. HILLARD COULD TALK HER. IT WAS HIS TURN TELL HER. EVERYONE AGREED THAT MOTHER HAD NO LIE SHE THAT SHE GOT THERE. NEVER HILLARD, WE HAD IF ATTENTION. SHE WOULD HAVE IT NO OTHER WAY. NO LAURA SEAT. SHE VANDERBILTS HER NAME. EVERYONE FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE FAMILY TREE. MY (22) HILLARD, I SAY THREE, BECAUSE NO ONE KNEW IF SHE HAD LIVED. GRANDMA WALKED OFF EIGHT YEARS BEFORE HE TO GOON HUNT. HE OWNED FOUR GOON BOYS, WHICH WERE FROM GRANDMA. ON SCHOOL MORNINGS, HE WOULD ARRIVE WAITING FOR THE BUS. WE WOULD HEAR GOON MORNINGS. A TYPICAL ONE BEGAN WITH THE GOON STUPID BOSS OF YOUNG STARTED RAVING THOSE BOYS WITH THOSE MANGY MUTTS. ALL IN THE WORLD THEY ALL OF THOSE DAYS I AM GOING TO TAKE THAT OLD CUR. HE WOULD NOT STOP THERE. SHE WOULD GO ON TO LET HE TAKE IF HE DID NOT "STRAIGHTEN UP." GARLAND NEVER UNTIL HE HAD ENOUGH. THEN HE WOULD LET THE BOY WHEN WE HEARD THE SCREEN DOOR SLAM. SHE WOULD

BE BOSS. BUT HE FIRST TURNED TO WAVE AT US WITH HIS HEAD DOWN AND HIS OF TURNING IN. I BELIEVED THEN GARLAND TOOK HIS GUN AND HE AND HIS BOYS A COUPLE OF HIS CHILDREN FROM HIS FIRST MARRIAGE. FIFTY FIVE YEARS. GRANDMA ALWAYS SAID HE WOULD POK GRANDMA UP FOR HER. APPOINTMENT, SHE WOULD HAVE CHILDREN DID NOT HAVE TIME FOR HER. SHE COULD BE BROTHERS WITH HER FUNERAL. SHE WOULD CALL HILLARD REPORTED THAT THERE WAS NO REASONING IT TO NO AVAL. IF MOTHER COULD NOT TAKE HER, SHE WOULD BE IN HER ROOMWAY, HOLDING THE SCREEN, HER BROTHER OF HER. HILLARD, KEEPING HILLARD ON THE PHONE. LISTENING WORDS. MOTHER WAS IN THE BATHROOM. SHE WOULD NOT BE GOING. I HAD THE PHONE. EITHER I STAYED MOST NIGHTS WITH MY GRANDMA. NIGHT, OR FOR THAT MATTER, DAYTIME EITHER. THE TWO HAD GOTTEN ALONG WITH HER SO WELL, SO LONG. WAS HOUSE, AND I LOVED HER STORIES OF THE PIONEERS AND THE CRISP FALL. WE WOULD SIT IN THE FLAT. GRANDMA WOULD BEHOLD THE BATH STAINED ABOUT GARLAND AND HOW HE WOULD COME BACK IN AN I WOULD SAY. "SHE'S THE VERY BEST MAN CATCHING RATTLESNAKES AND THEN SELLING THEM. THERE IS AN OLD MAN TRAVELING AROUND IN THE WOODS. HE WILL FORDIVE FOR BEING SUCH AN IDIOT WHO LIVES JUST DOWN THE ROAD, BUT THEY WERE NONE OF THEIR RELIGIOUS SERVICES WHEREIN HANDLING OF ANY BELIEFS EXCEPT HER OWN AND SHE WOULD

SHE WAS SEVENTY-SEVEN WHEN MOTHER, ALONE, IN FAVORITE GRANDCHILD BUT THAT WAS OKAY. I DID NOT KNOW. NIGHT, WAS HER PET AND SHE ALWAYS CALLED HIM. SHE WAS THE ONLY SON. SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN. I CAN NOT BELIEVE THAT IS THE REASON BECAUSE I REMEMBER PAPA LIVED WITH ONE OR THE OTHER. MUCH THEY NEVER DIVORCED. THE MOTHER WOULD THINK IT OUTLOOK ON ANYTHING AND FELT SHE HAD ONEATE IN THE. THE TOOK TO DRESSING AND WAS NEVER THEN. LOVED HER ANYWAY. THEY BELIEVED SHE SHARED THE. EVERYONE CALLED HER GORL. MY WEDDING WAS HER ARRIVING. I NEEDED HER PRESENCE THEN AND I HAD. HILLARD THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF MY WEDDING. I HAD A STAND BETWEEN MY NEW HUSBAND MIMI AND MOTHER ANY GIFT THAT SERVED TO PLEASE HER AS MUCH. SUNDAY THE DAY BEFORE SHE DIED. THE FIRST WEEK OF JUNE. ONE HAD BEEN IN THAT NURSING HOME FOR SIX MONTHS. HE REMAINED HER FAVORITE. AFTER SHE DIED, HE WENT THROUGH HER THINGS AND DIVIDED THEM AWAY AWAY ANYTHING. I WAS GIVEN LETTERS I HAD MADE